

Fruits of Malice

TheRealThing

Star Wars

Complete



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Summary

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Description:

In an alternate universe, Anakin Skywalker was taken from his mother at the age of four. He was raised as Darth Vader in a loveless, brutal environment. His life takes an interesting turn when he has an encounter with a certain senator from Naboo.

Chapter 1

Prologue

Mos Espa market was always a busy place. Beings of all kind gathered there daily to sell their wares or purchase necessities. Many knew one another, for it was a small community. Of course, occasionally, there were strangers who were seen on the narrow streets of the small town. They were usually pilots who were on the planet for layovers, perhaps waiting for business or payment or both. They were left alone for the most part, for most of them were dangerous looking beings whose appearance and reputation was often enough to earn them a substantial amount of respect.

It was rare that anyone came to Tatooine without an express purpose. It was a remote planet, an outer rim world with little to offer except endless expanses of sand dunes and a harsh climate. It was rare, but occasionally there were those who came for a reason, a reason that would make them travel half way across the galaxy because it was just that important.

The tall white haired stranger was watched with mild curiosity by the merchants in the small market place. Judging by the fine clothes he wore, he was a man of means, and each of them were hopeful that he would see fit to sample some of their wares. But it wasn't the baskets or trinkets or home made delicacies that he was interested in; he wanted information. He wanted information about a child, a very young child. The gender of the child wasn't even known by this man, all he knew was that an unusual child resided here and he wanted to know where to find him or her.

"You must mean little Ani," an old woman selling pallies told the man.

"Ani?" the man, who simply introduced himself as the Count, asked. "A girl?"

"No, that's his nickname," Jira informed him. "Anakin is his name, Anakin Skywalker. Why would you be looking for him?"

Count Dooku smiled his most charming smile. "I'm the boy's great uncle," he lied. "And have only recently learned of his existence."

"Are you here to buy the boy's freedom?" Jira asked hopefully.

"I beg your pardon?" Dooku asked.

"Ani is a slave," Jira informed him. 'He and his mother are both owned by a toydarian named Watto. He owns that shop right over there,' she said, pointing to a junk shop down the road a bit. "Young Ani works there," she told him, convinced that she was being helpful.

"Indeed?" Dooku asked. "How old a boy is he then?"

"Four," Jira told him. "But he's a smart wee boy," she hastened to add.

Dooku smiled again. "I'm sure he is," he replied. 'Thank you so much for your assistance, dear lady,' he said, pulling out a large wad of credits from within his cloak. "Here's a little something for your troubles," he added, handing her the money.

Jira was only too happy to receive it. She was excited for young Ani, for she was very fond of the young boy and had always felt that he deserved a much better life than that of a slave. *And now he's going to have one*, she reflected as she stuffed the wad of credits into her money box. She watched as Dooku headed over to the shop, but was distracted by a sudden noise behind her. She turned only to see nothing there, and when she looked back to where Dooku was, saw that he'd disappeared. Jira shrugged, and turned her attention to a customer who had just stepped up to her stand.

Chapter 1

Fifteen years later

Senator Padmé Amidala looked around the enormous pavilion as she entered on the arm of her long time friend and escort, Palo. Amidala always loved coming to Alderaan, for besides her beloved home world of Naboo, it was her favourite place in the galaxy. The Grand Alderaanian Gathering was an annual event hosted by the royal family of Alderaan and attended by socialites, political figures and military officers from all over the galaxy. An invitation to the Gathering was a sign of social status, one that many sought but only a select few actually received. Padmé Amidala was one of those select few.

"Senator Amidala, it's so wonderful to see you," Queen Breha Organa greeted Padmé, giving her a kiss on each cheek.

"Thank you your majesty," Padmé replied. "You might remember Palo Corrino," she said, turning to her date next.

"Of course," Breha replied. 'He was with you last year,' she remembered. "Welcome, Palo."

Palo bowed to the queen. "Your majesty, it's an honor to be here again."

"Please enjoy yourselves," Breha said, and then moved on to greet more guests.

Padmé and Palo watched her move off, and then Palo slipped an arm around Padmé's waist. "You heard what she said," he told her, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Let's enjoy ourselves."

Padmé smiled. Since agreeing to marry Palo a few weeks earlier, he had become much more demonstrative of his feelings in public, something that made her very uneasy. She was a senator, and had an image to uphold. Palo was an artist, and an emotional person who simply showed his feelings whenever he felt the urge to do so. His urges had been rather obvious lately, but he had been rebuffed by his fiancée who insisted on waiting for their wedding night to consummate their relationship. Truth be told, Padmé wasn't certain that she even wanted to have a physical relationship with Palo. As much as she loved him, there was no spark of desire when he kissed her, no thrill when he touched her hand or put his arm around her as he was right now. But he was a good man, a good friend, who knew and understood her and accepted her devotion to her career without question. Her family, who had begun to wonder if she would ever settle down, had been thrilled to hear that she had accepted Palo's offer of marriage.

"Would you like a drink, darling?" Palo asked her.

"Yes, that would be nice, thanks," she replied.

“Anything for you,” he told her, kissing her softly on the lips before taking his leave of her.

Padmé was embarrassed by his overt gestures of affection, and turned away to seek out some of her colleagues from the senate.

“Two Naboo blossom wines,” Palo told the droid tending bar.

“Yes sir,” the droid replied and moved at once to fill the order.

Palo leaned one elbow on the bar as he waited, his eyes drifting over the crowd of dignitaries at he did so. He felt a sense of pride when he noticed that there was not one woman who could rival the beauty of his fiancée. He looked over at her, the sight of her still sending a thrill through his veins. Padmé looked stunning in the floor length gown of deep blue which accentuated the feminine perfection of her body. Palo had been attracted to Padmé for years, since they’d first met as children. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that she’d agree to marry him. He was disappointed that he’d have to wait for their wedding to make love to her, but she was worth the wait. He smiled to himself as he thought of it now, picking up the two glasses from the bar as he did so. Palo turned to walk away, only to bump into someone who was standing in his path.

“Do you mind?” Palo asked, annoyed that the wine had sloshed out of the glasses and onto his immaculate white tunic.

The man he’d bumped into turned slowly to face him, and Palo took a step back when he realized who it was.

“Do *I* mind?” the man asked, his deep voice laced with sarcasm. “I’m not the one wearing my drink right now,” he remarked.

“Vader,” Palo said, nodding his head at the young man. “I didn’t see you there.”

From within his deep cowl, Vader smirked. “Are you blind as well as clumsy?” he asked.

“Well, no,” Palo replied, becoming irritated at the young man’s contemptuous manner. ‘I did apologize,’ he added peevishly, “though you seem quite unwilling to accept my apology.”

Vader took a step closer to him. “I don’t know who you are,” he said. “But I don’t like you. It isn’t my fault that you’re a clumsy fool who is too busy thinking about sex that he can’t watch where he’s going.”

Palo’s face grew hot with embarrassment and indignation at this remark. Darth Vader’s reputation for being highly Force sensitive was well known; but until now Palo did not realize just what that meant. He could read minds as easily as most men breathed air. And that was unnerving to say the least.

“What I was thinking about is none of your damn business, Vader,” Palo snapped back. ‘You clearly have no respect for the privacy of others,’ he added. “No wonder you’re such a valuable asset to the chancellor.”

Vader wasn’t put off by the man’s attempts to insult him; he had a rather thick hide after all. He was more intrigued by the man’s thoughts, and was enjoying Palo’s humiliation. “So whose bed are you trying to get into?” he asked the mocking tone in his voice returning.

Palo scowled, forcing all images of Padmé from his mind. "I'm walking away now," he stated, trying to muster up his dignity.

"I suppose you're no stranger to rejection by now," Vader said as he walked away. "That must get frustrating though, night after night." Palo ignored the comment and made his way back to Padmé. He realized that Vader was no doubt watching him to see who he was returning to. Part of him thought he ought to avoid her to throw Vader off of the trail; but his masculine ego got the better of him and he walked right up to her. He wanted Vader to see that the most beautiful woman in the room was his. He wanted to rub it in the arrogant young man's face that Padmé Amidala was his.

Palo was right, Vader was watching, for he was curious to see who it was that had Palo so distracted. And when he saw her, he smirked. *Senator Padmé Amidala*, he thought, recognizing her at once. *The republic's biggest enabler and bleeding heart*. He watched for a moment as the man slipped an arm around her waist and kissed her passionately on the mouth. Vader frowned, knowing that the man was doing it simply to grandstand. He wanted Vader to know that she was his, and knew he was watching. *Idiot*, Vader thought and looked away.

"Palo, please," Padmé said, moving away from him. "What's got into you?"

"Just you," he told her with a smile.

Padmé shook her head, and then noticed the wine on his clothing. "What happened?"

"Oh, I had a little accident," he replied, looking with dismay at the wine. 'Nothing to worry about,' he added. "Let's forget about it, shall we?"

Padmé nodded, sensing that there was more to Palo's accident than he was letting on. "I don't know if you should leave that wine on your clothes, though," she told him. "Why don't you see if you can clean it off before it ruins your tunic?"

Palo sighed, realizing that she was probably right. "I suppose that's a good idea," he admitted. He kissed her again. 'I won't be long,' he told her. "Will you miss me?" he asked.

Padmé smiled. "Of course," she replied.

Palo smiled and then left her once more.

Padmé looked around to see where Mon Mothma had wandered off to, and headed outside to see if she was there. The pavilion was surrounded by a large terrace which afforded a spectacular view of the mountains nearby. Padmé decided to seek out Mothma on the terrace, knowing her friend's fondness for the wonderful view. There were a few people outside, some standing in groups, others in couples, but Mon Mothma wasn't among them. Padmé continued on her way, but stopped when a magnificent vista appeared. She couldn't resist a better look, and walked over to the railing to admire the scene.

"Spectacular, isn't it?"

Padmé turned quickly, startled by the voice. She was unnerved to find Darth Vader standing beside her.

"Yes, very much so," she replied, doing her utmost to remain calm. Although she didn't know him personally, Padmé was very much aware of Vader's reputation. He was the right

hand of the most powerful man in the galaxy, Chancellor Palpatine, and possessed powers that some say surpassed those of even the most powerful Jedi. Vader was a mystery, an elusive, dangerous man very few people could say they knew well. Padmé knew enough about him, however, to be on her guard.

Vader watched the senator, sensing her apprehension. He smiled. “Where is your clumsy boyfriend?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“He spilled wine all over himself bumping into me earlier,” Vader told her. “I’d say that’s clumsy, wouldn’t you?”

Padmé turned away, not wanting to be drawn into a discussion about Palo with this man. “Accidents happen,” she remarked.

“Indeed they do,” Vader replied, leaning his arms on the terrace and looking out at the snowcapped mountains in the distance. ‘He was distracted by thoughts of you,’ he told her without removing his gaze from the vista before them. “Rather... provocative thoughts.”

Padmé turned and looked at him in shock. “How would you know what he was thinking about?” she demanded.

Vader turned to her, his cowl pushed back ever so slightly to afford her a look at his face. She was annoyed to see that he was smiling. “I have a gift for reading the thoughts of others,” he told her, his eyes boring into hers. “Would you like me to prove it to you?” he offered, his smile growing.

Padmé frowned. “No,” she replied at once, turning away from him. “Would you please leave me alone?” she asked.

Vader said nothing for a moment, finding it surprisingly challenging to read her thoughts. “He wants to screw you,” he told her at last, the contempt clear in his voice. “But surely you knew that already,” he added. He waited a moment longer before he walked away.

Padmé felt herself trembling with rage and humiliation. *How dare he? How dare he invade the private thoughts of others? Who do you think you are, Darth Vader?* she thought angrily. She looked out of the corner of her eyes, relieved to see that he had moved off.

“Padmé? What are you doing out here?”

She turned and smiled when she saw Palo walking over to her. Her smile grew when she saw that his attempts to clean up the wine had only made the mess bigger. “Just admiring the view,” she said as he reached her. She linked her arm though his and rested her head on his shoulder. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Palo nodded, feeling that she was still trembling as she held onto his arm. “What is it, sweetheart?” he asked. “You’re shaking.”

Padmé didn’t reply, for the last thing she wanted was to repeat Vader’s vile words. “I’m fine,” she told him.

Palo turned her to face him. “No you’re not,” he stated, studying her face closely. “What’s wrong? Who were you talking to while I was gone?”

Padmé sighed, and lowered her eyes. “Darth Vader,” she told him quietly.

Palo grew angry immediately. “What did he say to you?” he demanded. When Padmé didn’t reply, he lifted her chin so that her eyes met his. “Tell me what he said,” he asked.

“He was just admiring the view with me,” she told him.

“That’s not enough to make you tremble like this,” he replied. “What else?”

Padmé felt terribly uneasy, but knew Palo wouldn’t relent until she told him what had transpired between her and Vader. “He claimed that he’d read your mind earlier,” she told him quietly.

Palo’s anger slowly simmered as she told him what Vader had said to her. He made no attempt to deny what Vader had said, for Vader had been dead on. But the fact that he would tell Padmé such a thing, and in such a vulgar manner infuriated him.

“He won’t get away with this,” Palo said at last, taking her hand and starting to move away. “I won’t stand by and let him speak to you like that.”

“Palo, are you mad?” she retorted, pulling her hand free. “He’s Darth Vader, remember? He’ll kill you if you challenge him!”

Palo stopped, hating to admit that she was right. He clenched his fists in frustration, the thought that this arrogant young man could get away with his abuse infuriating him. “Padmé, I can’t let this go,” he told her. ‘I simply won’t allow him to talk to you like some common lower level slut,’ he added hotly. “You’re a lady, damn it! Who the hell does he think he is, anyway?”

“He’s a very powerful, very dangerous man,” she told him, taking his hands in hers. “And it’s best if we just leave this alone. Please, Palo, please don’t do anything that will anger him.”

Palo sighed, knowing that he was totally unable to deny her anything she asked of him. “Very well,” he relented at last. “I’ll let it go, this time. But mark my words, Padmé; if he does anything like this again, I can’t make that same promise again.”

Padmé nodded, relieved that he was willing to back down. “Come on,” she said, linking her arm through his again. “Let’s go inside and find some of our friends. We came here to have fun, remember?”

Palo nodded, smiling ever so slightly. “I love you, Padmé,” he told her. “More than anything.”

She smiled. “I know you do,” she replied. ‘And I love you too,’ she said, giving him a chaste peck on the cheek. “Now come on,” she said. “I’m hungry.”

Palo smiled and let her lead him back inside the pavilion.

Later that night, Palo lay awake in the guest room of Padmé’s luxurious Republica Boulevard apartment. He was still angry over what had happened earlier, even more so because Padmé had made him promise not to confront Vader about it. Didn’t she realize that his pride was on the line? Vader had humiliated him, didn’t she care about that? *Perhaps a*

little pay back is in order, he reflected, smiling as a plan to avenge his fiancée materialized in his mind. But he couldn't do it alone.

Getting out of bed, he walked over to the computer situated on the other side of the guest room. He sat down, and keyed in the code to his parents' house back on Naboo. After a few moments, the image of his father appeared on the screen.

"Hi Dad," Palo said. "I need a favor."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Darth Vader sat in the inner sanctum of the chancellor's offices. The leather chair he sat in was comfortable, perhaps too comfortable. With his long legs stretched out in front of him, it would be very easy to fall asleep while the Chancellor held his weekly audiences. People came to him with all manner of problems, and Vader often wondered how they got into the office at all. He had been told in no uncertain terms that it was important for him to be present, and had made the mistake of being late only once. He had not repeated that mistake. Palpatine was not a forgiving man; Vader had learned that as a very young child. He still bore the scars of beatings he'd received in those early months when he'd first come into the custody of Palpatine and his apprentice, Dooku. Vader had learned very quickly not to show any emotion that wasn't dark in nature, to suppress all basic human needs, such as the need for love, the need for kindness and compassion, for he'd get none from Palpatine. He hated his master, but that was what Palpatine expected of him. Hatred was the way of the dark side, after all.

"One more, your Excellency," Palpatine's major domo informed him. "Palo Corrino of Naboo who has a complaint about Lord Vader."

Vader lifted his eyebrows at this, sitting up straight in his chair at once.

"What's this about, Vader?" Palpatine asked, a scowl on his face.

"I have no idea," Vader replied, not knowing who Palo Corrino was. "I've never heard of the man."

"Well this ought to be interesting," Palpatine replied. 'Perhaps it would be best if he not know you're here,' he suggested. "Otherwise he may not be so...forthcoming."

"Of course, my master," Vader replied, annoyed that he'd have to leave his comfortable seat. He stood up and walked over to the small storage area adjacent to the office where he had a perfect view of what was going on without being seen. He didn't have to wait long before Palo Corrino appeared, and he smirked to himself as he remembered who he was and the complaint he had no doubt come to lodge against him.

"Good day to you, Mr. Corrino," Palpatine began in his most diplomatic voice. "Please sit down. Your father told me that this was a very urgent matter."

"It is, your Excellency," Palo replied as he took a seat, the very seat Vader had been sitting in moments earlier. "It has to do with your...protégé, Darth Vader."

"Oh? What has he done now?" Palpatine asked with a frown.

"He insulted my fiancée," Palo replied. "As well as myself, with his crude remarks and innuendoes."

“I see,” Palpatine replied, doing his best to appear concerned. In reality he cared very little what Vader did when it came to social niceties. He was a well trained weapon, like a well bred guard animal. “Go on,” he said at last.

“It was at the Gathering on Alderaan two days ago,” Palo went on. ‘He... told Senator Amidala that I had lewd thoughts about her,’ he stated uneasily. “He claimed that he could read those thoughts in my mind and felt it necessary to share them with her. And he did so in a most crude manner, using language not fit for a lady.”

Palpatine nodded, secretly amused by the incident. “I assure you Mr. Corrino that Lord Vader will be dealt with,” he said. “Please extend my apologies to Senator Amidala, as well as my best wishes on your recent engagement,” he added with a smile.

Palo smiled back. “Thank you, your Excellency,” he replied. “I appreciate your attention to this manner. Vader is an animal, if I may say so. He has no business in polite, civilized society. May I suggest he be kept from such social events in the future? It would save us all a lot of head ache if we didn’t need to deal with him and his filth again.”

“He will be dealt with,” Palpatine assured him, feeling the surge of anger that raged through Vader as he listened to Palo malign him. “Good day to you, Mr. Corrino.”

Palo bowed and then turned and left. As soon as the door closed behind him, one of the glass decanters on a side table shattered into a thousand pieces. Palpatine smiled. “Seems you’ve been ruffling some feathers,” he called to Vader.

Vader entered the room, his eyes yellow with rage. “The man is an imbecile,” he growled. “His inability to control his libido isn’t my problem.”

Palpatine nodded. “He thinks you’re an animal,” he pointed out, trying to get the young man angrier. “That you have no place in decent society. He thinks he’s better than you.”

Vader’s fists clenched tighter, the anger in him boiling hot. “I should have killed him where he stood after he ran into me at the damn party,” he snarled.

“Why didn’t you?” Palatine asked.

Vader looked at him in surprise. “I... didn’t think you would approve,” he replied.

Palpatine waved a hand dismissively. “The man is an artist,” he replied with scorn. “And a bad one at that. Do what you want with him, Vader. Have some fun. You have my permission to get your revenge for this insult.”

Vader smiled. He was an uncommonly handsome man, but when he was in the throes of anger, his smile was a terrifying sight to behold. “Thank you, my master,” he replied. “I will enjoy this very much indeed.”

Padmé Amidala had just concluded a rather long meeting and was about to go home for the evening when she remembered that she’d left something back in her office. Palo would be annoyed that she was so late, for tonight was their last evening together before he returned to Naboo for an important convention. Having him staying with her in her home had made Padmé rather uneasy, for she knew all too well that he wanted more than anything to share her bed. And yet, to his credit, he’d remained in the guest room, despite his feelings. The tension was becoming uncomfortable, however; Palo wasn’t exactly subtle about his desire for her,

and had made more than one comment to that affect. No, some space would be good right now, Padmé reflected as she stepped off the lift and walked to her office. She keyed in the code, only to find that the door was already unlocked. Reasoning that one of her assistants had come back to work late, she entered the office. Walking to her desk, Padmé suddenly had the impression that someone was watching her. Turning slowly she nearly screamed when she saw Darth Vader sitting in a large chair, watching her.

“How did you get in here?” she cried, moving around behind the desk to put some distance between them.

“Irrelevant, since I’m here,” he replied calmly.

Padmé frowned. “What do you want?” she asked, trying not to show how afraid she was. “Why have you come here?”

Vader stood up, his large stature doing nothing to alleviate Padmé’s fears. “Where is your fiancé, that ridiculous popinjay Corrino?” he asked.

Padmé’s fears redoubled at his question. “Why do you want to know?” she asked.

Vader walked to the desk, setting his large hands on the top of it, staring at her intently. “Tell me where he is,” he said again, his eyes glowing yellow.

Padmé could feel her heart racing within her. “I... I’m not sure where he is,” she replied at last. “Why do you want to know?” she asked again. “Tell me, please!”

Vader studied her for a moment, sifting through her unprotected mind briefly before he found what he needed. *500 Republica Boulevard, penthouse suite...*

“He has a debt to pay,” he told her, and then turned to leave with a flourish of his great black cloak. “Thank you for the information,” he added.

Padmé realized to her horror that he had read her mind, and ran around the desk to intercept him. “No, please,” she told him, standing before him. “Don’t hurt him!”

Vader frowned. He had no wish to harm the woman, but if she stood in his way, he may have no choice. “Move aside, Senator,” he warned her.

“Not until you promise not to hurt Palo,” she replied, surprising Vader with her courage.

“Palo will die, Senator,” he told her emotionlessly. “He will pay for the insults he hurled at me earlier today. I won’t stand for it, Senator. He has gone too far.”

Padmé was confused. “What do you mean?” she demanded. “What did he do?”

Vader was becoming impatient with the woman, but decided to favor her with an explanation. Padmé listened in silence as he told her what had transpired at Palpatine’s office earlier.

“He will pay for his slander, Senator,” he told her. “Now stand aside.”

Emotions raged through Padmé; anger that Palo had broken his promise not the least of them. But she couldn’t simply stand here and let him be killed because he had done so, could she? Surely no one deserved such harsh retribution.

“No,” she said at last, surprising both her and Vader.

Vader’s eyebrows shot up. “No??” he said incredulously. “What precisely do you plan to do to stop me?”

Padmé thought frantically. “Whatever it takes,” she said at last, realizing that she was leaving herself vulnerable to anything Vader could think up.

Vader was shocked by her offer. “Whatever it takes, you say,” he replied. “That entails a great deal, Senator,” he told her.

Padmé’s face reddened as she thought of what must be going through his mind, starting to wonder if she’d made a huge mistake. Vader could see her thoughts and frowned. “I may be many things, Senator, but I’m not a rapist,” he told her.

“I didn’t say you were,” she said at once, relieved to hear it. “So what do you want from me then? I’ll give you whatever you want in exchange for Palo’s life.”

“Is his life worth so much to you?” he asked, genuinely surprised.

Padmé frowned. “All life has meaning to me,” she retorted. “Unlike you, who obviously have nothing but contempt for life.”

Vader frowned, her integrity starting to get on his nerves. How he’d love to break that spirit, to show her that people were really not worth saving, that life was really quite worthless. And then he had an idea.

“I know what I want,” he said at last, folding his arms over his broad chest.

Padmé swallowed hard. “Okay,” she said, bracing herself for his terms. “Name it.”

“I want you to marry me instead of Corrino,” he replied.

His words could not have been more shocking to her, and for a moment she simply stared at him.

“You can’t be serious,” she finally said.

“I’m very serious,” he replied. “You did say anything.”

“I did, but...but why that?” she asked. “Why would you want that? You don’t care about me.”

“No I don’t,” he replied. “But I will have my revenge, Senator. If I can’t kill him, then this is the next best thing. In fact, it may even be better,” he added with a smile.

Hatred filled Padmé as she realized what she had so unwittingly done. “You’d marry me just to spite him, wouldn’t you?” she asked coldly.

“No, I *will* marry you just to spite him,” he corrected her. “Unless of course you’d prefer me to kill him,” he added.

Padmé shook her head miserably. “No,” she said quietly. “I can’t let that happen.”

“Then you know what you have to do, Senator,” Vader replied. “You have to willingly become my wife.”

Padmé's eyes filled with bitter tears. *Why couldn't you have just kept your promise, Palo?* She thought miserably. "Very well," she said at last. "I will do what you ask. But if you go back on your word the deal is off."

"You have my word," Vader replied. He held out a hand to her. "Do we have an agreement?" he asked.

Padmé looked at the large hand he held out to her. Realizing that her fate was sealed, she put her hand in his and shook. "Yes Lord Vader, we do."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

After a few moments of awkward silence, Padmé decided that it was time to go home and tell Palo the bad news.

"I'm coming with you," Vader told her when she started to leave.

She turned back to him. "That isn't necessary," she replied. "I think it's better if I tell him this alone."

"Perhaps, but I want to be there when you tell him," Vader replied.

Padmé frowned. "Why? Just so you can see how broken hearted he'll be?"

"Yes, that's it exactly," he replied, unperturbed by her anger. "I'm going to enjoy that."

"You are truly cruel," she told him with a shake of her head. "That you would take pleasure in the suffering of another... that's just... just..."

"Would you rather I kill him?" Vader asked calmly. "Because I will have my revenge, Senator. Make no mistake about that."

Padmé didn't reply, knowing that the choice she'd made had been the only one possible. *Better Palo be broken hearted than dead*, she reasoned.

"Let's get this over with," she said, turning to leave. Vader followed her without a word.

The ride up the lift to Padmé's apartment was tension filled and awkward. Padmé could feel the apprehension mounting within her as they drew closer to the penthouse suite. She looked over at Vader, who was simply watching her with a detached expression on his face. His total disregard for the feelings of others infuriated her, and made her hate him intently. *And soon we'll be married*, she reflected, the thought of Vader touching her making her skin crawl.

Vader could see the thoughts as they raged through Padmé's mind, and simply smirked in response, which served to infuriate Padmé more. Finally the lift stopped, and she moved to the door, anxious to get away from Vader. To her consternation he stepped right behind her, close enough to make her shudder from the incidental contact. As soon as the doors opened, she stepped out and away from him.

"Nice place," Vader commented as they stepped into the apartment. "I think I'll like it here."

Padmé said nothing in response, but simply gave him a black look over her shoulder. Her anger merely added to Vader's enjoyment of the situation and he smiled.

"Palo, are you here?" she called as she removed her cloak. To her surprise Vader took it from her and hung it up for her.

“You’re late,” Palo said as he appeared. “I was beginning to worry. Have you eaten? Maybe we could...” he stopped as Vader stepped into view. “What the hell is *he* doing here??” he demanded, more than a little alarmed at the sight of the enormous, menacing figure standing behind his fiancée.

“Palo, we need to talk,” Padmé said. She glanced back at Vader briefly. “Let’s go in and sit down.”

Palo frowned, his eyes not leaving Vader as he followed Padmé into the large central room of the apartment and took a seat beside her. Vader looked around, taking in every feature of the luxurious penthouse, before returning his attention to Palo. He waited for Padmé to begin, leaning back easily on the comfortable sofa.

“What is going on, Padmé?” Palo asked, looking at her finally. “Why is he here?”

Padmé sighed, folding her hands in her lap nervously as she tried to find the words she needed. But what could she say that wouldn’t tear Palo’s world apart? Vader could sense how anxious she was, and yet said nothing, leaving it to her to drop the proverbial bomb.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this,” Padmé began, her eyes cast down to the carpet. “But I can’t marry you, Palo. I’m sorry.”

Palo felt as though he’d had the wind knocked out of him. “What?? What do you mean you *can’t* marry me?” He shot a look at Vader. “And what does this have to do with him?” he demanded as though Vader weren’t present.

Padmé glanced at Vader, who simply sat back with his long arms stretched out across the back of the sofa, looking completely at ease and comfortable. “You...went to see Palpatine today, didn’t you?” she asked, looking up at him.

Palo wondered briefly how she knew, but figured it was pointless to deny it. “Yes,” he admitted.

Padmé sighed and dropped her gaze down to her hands once more. “Why, Palo?” she asked quietly. “You promised me you wouldn’t say anything, you promised me you’d let it go!”

Palo was beginning to grow alarmed. “What are you talking about?” he asked.

“You told Palpatine about what happened at the Gathering,” she stated.

“So what if I did?” Palo said in exasperation. “What has that to do with you being unable to marry me?”

Padmé looked at Vader and then back at Palo. “Everything,” she replied. “You see, Lord Vader overheard everything you said to Palpatine,” she explained.

Palo’s face went white as he turned his eyes slowly to Vader. He said nothing, and so Padmé continued.

“He... didn’t like the things you said, Palo,” she said. “He was very angry when he came to me, and...”

“He came to you?” Palo interrupted. “What do you mean? Where? When?”

“He came to my office earlier tonight,” Padme explained. ‘To find out where he could find you.’ She paused for a moment. “He was going to kill you, Palo. Kill you for the way you spoke about him.”

Palo swallowed hard, trying his best not to show how terrified he was. Vader’s eyes were riveted to his, the look in them giving Palo no chance to misinterpret what Padmé was telling him.

“Well this is preposterous,” Palo sputtered at last. “You can’t simply kill me! There are laws, Vader, laws about murdering people.”

Vader cocked one eyebrow. “Laws? You think I give a damn about laws?” he remarked with a smirk. ‘Surely you realize that there are those of us who are above the law,’ he added. “Those of us who you deem, how was it you put it? Unfit for good society, wasn’t that it?”

Palo felt the color drain from his face once more, realizing that Vader was entirely right. And yet, he was still at a loss to understand what this had to do with his engagement to Padmé. “So what has any of this to do with you, Padmé?” he asked, looking at her at last.

“You really are a simpleton, aren’t you Corrino?” Vader said, leaning forward and giving Palo a withering look. ‘The senator bargained for your life,’ he told him. “She and I have struck a deal, one that has saved your miserable hide.”

Palo looked at Vader, and then back at Padmé. “You... won’t marry me if he spares me? Is that it?” Palo asked.

“Yes, that’s part of it,” Padmé replied.

“Part of it? What else did you agree to?” he asked, almost afraid to know.

Padmé sighed. “I...I told Vader that I would marry him if he would spare your life,” she said at last. “That’s the deal I made with him.”

Palo was silent for a moment, the shock of what he had just heard rendering him speechless. “You... you can’t be serious!” he exclaimed finally. “You agreed to marry *him*? He’s a monster, Padmé! An animal!”

Vader’s eyes narrowed. “If I were, you’d already be dead,” he retorted in a voice of deadly calm.

Padmé turned to him. “Please, don’t start,” she said. “What’s done is done,” she added.

“How can you say that?” Palo cried. “I can’t believe you’ve done this, Padmé! How could you betray me like this?”

“Betray you??” she cried in response. “Is that how you see this?? I’ve traded my life for yours, Palo! How can that possibly be betrayal?”

Palo had no reply for her. He felt such pain, such disappointment and anger that he didn’t know what to say.

“You have no one to blame but yourself for this... situation,” Vader said at last. “I’m not a man to be trifled with, Corrino. Perhaps you can see that now.”

Palo looked at him, and then at Padmé. “Padmé, you can’t do this,” he said. “I’d rather he kill me than see you married to him!”

“Don’t be foolish,” she admonished him. “I won’t allow it, and that’s final.”

The silence that followed was oppressive. Finally it was Palo who spoke.

“Would you leave now?” he asked Vader. “And give me a few moments alone with my fiancée?”

“Don’t you mean *my* fiancée?” Vader replied. ‘And no, I won’t,’ he added. “I don’t want you anywhere near her. So perhaps *you* ought to leave. Right now.”

Palo clenched his fists tightly in impotent rage. “You bastard,” he said quietly. “Does this make you happy, Vader? Destroying lives this way?”

Vader’s eyes turned yellow as he stared daggers at the man. “Get out,” he said quietly. “Before I do something you will most certainly regret.”

Padmé closed her eyes as the misery filled her. “Please go, Palo,” she said quietly as the tears rose to her eyes.

Palo looked at Vader one last time and then stood up. Without another word he went to the guest room to start packing his things.

“Did you enjoy that?” Padmé asked Vader, turning to him. “Did that satisfy your need for revenge?”

“Yes it did,” he replied. “Quite effectively.”

Padmé shook her head. “I can’t even look at you,” she said as she stood up. “You can let yourself out. I’m going to bed.”

Vader simply watched her as she left the room. He then stood up and walked over to the balcony, admiring the view for a moment until he sensed Palo reenter the room. He turned to face him, pleased to see that Palo had his suitcase in hand. No words were spoken between the two men, but the look in Palo’s eyes said it all. Vader folded his arms over his broad chest and waited for Palo to leave, determined not to leave the apartment until he had done so.

“Don’t hurt her,” Palo said at last. “She’s a lady, and deserves to be treated like one.”

Vader made no answer, so Palo turned and walked away. He stopped and took one last look around the apartment before he stepped onto the lift and out of Padmé Amidala’s life.

Vader waited until the lift had descended before he walked across the room. He looked around, deciding that he liked the place, before walking to the lift. From down the hall he heard the sound of crying, as Padmé gave full vent to her misery. He was unmoved by it, however and simply waited for the lift and then left the apartment, satisfied that vengeance had been served.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

500 Republica Boulevard.

Padmé slept very little that night. What little sleep she had was plagued with troubling visions of the future. She could not imagine what life would be like for her once she had married Vader. It was clear that he didn't want her, he only wanted revenge. But he was a man, and as such would no doubt make demands of her, which, once they were married, she would be unable to refuse him. Perhaps he'd make them of her before they were even married; and he hardly seemed the type to be gently rebuffed as Palo had been. *Poor Palo!* She thought miserably as hot tears slid down her face. *Why couldn't you just have left it alone like you promised??* The look of hurt in his dark eyes was one she knew would haunt her for a long time; but what choice did she have? Vader would surely have been true to his threat had she refused him. Even now, she feared that he may still do so. He wasn't a man who could be trusted, after all. Palo had been right about him; he was an animal. *An animal who will be my husband one day...*

An idea came to Padmé through all the emotional turmoil, one that gave her a glimmer of hope. *What if I stall the wedding?* She thought. Vader had already made it quite clear that he didn't care about her, didn't want her except as a means of revenge; what if she stalled long enough that he lost interest? Perhaps he would just let it go, and move on? *It's at least a possibility,* she told herself. *If I can hold off the wedding long enough, maybe he will grow tired of waiting and leave me alone...*

With this thought in mind, Padmé arose early. She knew she'd get no more sleep, and thought that if she occupied herself with her duties; it would help to calm her nerves. *This has to work,* she told herself as she headed for the fresher. *It's my only hope.*

Senate Chambers

Chancellor Palpatine had learned many years earlier that he could live without sleep. In fact, it had been many years since he had slept. Palpatine had learned his lessons well, for his treacherous betrayal of his own master many years earlier had taught him that sleep could be dangerous, even fatal.

Palpatine was no stranger to betrayal. His own trusted apprentice, Count Dooku, had betrayed him a mere two years earlier, seizing control of the Separatists and their vast droid army. His treachery had forced Palpatine into a situation he hated. He was forced to rely on the Jedi for help in quelling Dooku's bids to take over the Republic. Of course, Palpatine had plans of his own. All he needed was the approval of the Senate to create an army of his own; however thus far, his efforts to convince them had been fruitless. There were some who saw the creation of a Republican army as the first step to galactic war. And there were some senators whose influence over others was far too strong for Palpatine's liking. Senator Padmé Amidala was one such senator.

Amidala had worked tirelessly to convince her fellow senators of the inherent dangers of the creation of a Republican army. Palpatine had begun to think that the senator would need to be dealt with. He was considering this when the door to his office opened and Darth Vader stepped inside.

“Good morning, Master,” Vader said in greeting.

“You’re here early,” Palpatine remarked.

Vader simply shrugged as he slid into one of the chairs in front of the large desk. “I have news,” he said.

Palpatine lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? What news?” he asked.

Vader smiled before he responded. “I’m getting married.”

Palpatine’s face slowly morphed into a scowl. “Married?? To whom? Since when?”

“Since last night,” Vader replied. “To Senator Amidala. She offered herself to me in exchange for the life of that imbecile she was engaged to.”

Palpatine nodded. “So you didn’t kill Corrino then,” he commented.

“No,” Vader replied. “I thought that this course of action was far more...entertaining.”

“I see,” Palpatine replied. From the tone of his voice, Vader knew at once that his master was not pleased. “And you didn’t see fit to consult me before making that determination?” he asked accusingly.

“Well, it was a decision that...” Vader began, but his sentence was stopped short an invisible grip on his larynx. His hands flew to his throat, knowing better than to offer any resistance or retaliation. Within a few seconds Palpatine released him, and Vader fell forward onto his knees, gasping for air.

“Such arrogance, Lord Vader,” Palpatine snapped. “To make such a decision without my approval.”

Vader looked up at his master, hating him intently. “I... thought you’d approve,” he gasped. “Amidala is very...influential.

Palpatine knew she was, and was secretly delighted that she would be under Vader’s control. But punishing Vader was the way of the Sith. Palpatine needed to keep Vader under his heel, for he knew all too well that the young man’s powers surpassed his own. But so long as Vader was kept subservient and treated like a slave, he would never dare to challenge his master’s authority.

“I suppose she is,” Palpatine replied at last. “But that isn’t the point now, is it?”

Vader lowered his eyes. “No, my master,” he replied quietly.

Palpatine sighed melodramatically as he stood up and walked around the desk. The sight of the powerful young Sith on his knees in subservience pleased him, and he smiled. “Rise, Lord Vader,” he said at last. “I have decided to be benevolent.”

Vader stood slowly, looking at his master warily, but without saying a word, waiting for him to continue.

"You *will* marry Senator Amidala," Palpatine decided. "As soon as possible. She is becoming...troublesome. I trust that you will be able to keep her well under control."

Vader nodded. "Yes, my master," he replied. "I will break her, I promise you."

Palpatine's smile grew. "Excellent," he replied. 'I will make the arrangements for a grand celebration,' he continued. "You see to it that the Senator is ready. You know, the dress, the ring, all that nonsense that females insist upon."

"I will inform her of our plans this very morning," Vader replied. "The Senator will not have a chance to back out, I promise you, Master."

Palpatine merely nodded in response, pleased at how well things had worked out in his favor once more.

Office of Senator Amidala

Padmé had just arrived at her office when she was met by her administrative assistant.

"Good morning, Milady," Ella greeted her.

Padmé could see at once that Ella was upset about something. "What's wrong, Ella?" she asked as the two women walked into the office.

Ella looked at her briefly and then looked away. "I'm... not feeling well, milady," she replied.

Padmé frowned. "Do you need to go home?" she asked. "I can manage if you aren't well."

Ella felt terrible leaving Padmé in the lurch this way, but felt as though she wasn't able to stay. "I'd like to go home, if you're sure you'll be able to manage, Senator."

"I'm sure," Padmé assured the woman. 'Now off with you,' she said. "Get better."

"Thank you, Milady," Ella said gratefully. "I'll be back tomorrow, I promise."

Padmé nodded as she watched the young woman leave. Ella had only recently entered her employ, having moved from Naboo a few months earlier. In the time she had known her, Padmé had found the young woman to be highly competent, and certainly friendly; however she'd received more than one report of Ella spending an inordinate amount of time frequenting Coruscant's drinking establishments during her off hours. Padmé herself had always lead such a sheltered life, never partaking in alcohol except in small amounts, never allowing herself to appear anything but the consummate professional in every social situation and milieu. It was rather shocking at first to learn that her assistant was quite the opposite, but Padmé had never been one to judge others, and quite liked the young woman. And so she overlooked Ella's wilder tendencies, deeming them irrelevant in light of the excellent work she did for Padmé.

Having checked over her schedule for the day, Padmé was relieved to see that it was fairly light. Yes, she could manage alone for the few hours she would be required to spend at the office, and sat down at her desk to commence her day. She'd only been working on a report

for half an hour when the door to her office opened. Looking up, she half expected to see Ella back again, having felt badly about leaving the way she had. But it was not Ella who now stood in the doorway. It was Palo.

“Palo!” she said, looking at him aghast. He looked as though he’d been up the whole night, for he was unshaven and his clothes looked rumpled. “What are you doing here?”

Palo stood in the doorway for a moment, staring at her before he responded. “Where’s Ella?” he asked at last.

Padmé frowned, his strange behavior starting to alarm her. “She... she went home sick,” she said, standing up slowly. “Why?”

Palo walked into the room, the door sliding closed behind him. “Because I don’t want to be interrupted,” he told her as he walked towards the office. As he drew closer Padmé could see that he was quite drunk, and her alarm jumped considerably at this realization.

“Palo, you’re drunk,” she said. “Please leave.”

Palo shook his head as he continued to walk towards the desk. “Why, Padmé?” he asked acrimoniously. “Why did you do it? Why did you betray me this way?”

Padmé moved behind her chair, her instincts telling her to put some distance between he and her. “You know why I did it,” she told him. “You left me no choice, Palo. I did it for you.”

Palo narrowed his rather bloodshot eyes and looked at her. “I don’t know if I believe you,” he slurred. ‘I remember the two of you at the Gathering last week,’ he continued. “What went on between the two of you when I was gone?”

“Nothing!” she cried in frustration. “I hate Darth Vader! Do you really think I want to marry him?? I’m only doing so to save your life! Why can’t you see that?”

“All I can see is that I am losing the best thing that ever happened to me,” he said, as tears filled his eyes. “I hate the thought of him touching you, Padmé! It makes me sick to think of it!”

“I know,” she said, starting to soften. “I feel the very same way, Palo. But surely you can see that there is no other way.”

Palo looked at her for a moment as though thinking over what she’d said. “No,” he said at last. ‘I suppose there isn’t. He’s won. Men like Vader always win,’ he added bitterly. “Why is that, Padmé?” he asked, moving towards her again. “Why do you suppose that is?”

“Vader is a powerful man,” she told him, growing alarmed by his proximity once more. “Men like him take what they want and don’t care who they hurt in the process.”

Palo nodded. “That’s true,” he replied. “But men like Vader aren’t the only ones to take what they want, Padmé,” he told her, still advancing upon her.

Fear began to blossom in Padmé when she looked into his eyes. Palo wasn’t a heavy drinker, but the rare occasions when he’d overindulged, he had typically become quite aggressive and more than a little amorous. Given the circumstances she was truly fearful, even more so as he continued to advance upon her.

“Palo, stop this,” she said, doing her best to sound authoritative. “You know this isn’t the way to solve anything,” she added.

“No?” he challenged. ‘I know it will make me feel better,’ he told her as he moved closer to her. “You owe me this, Padmé,” he continued. “For weeks of teasing me, weeks of denying me... and now you’re just going to throw me aside and give yourself to Darth Vader? I don’t think so,” he concluded, grabbing her suddenly by the arms.

“Palo, please don’t do this!” she cried as he pulled her roughly towards the desk.

But her pleas fell on deaf ears as he pushed her roughly onto the desk. “I’ve wanted you for so long, Padmé,” he told her as bent over her, his face hovering over hers. “And now I’m going to have you. Vader may be marrying you, but he won’t be the first to have your sweet body, I will,” he told her, pressing his mouth to hers and kissing her roughly. Padmé squirmed under him, her arms pinned to her sides by his vice like grip. Panic raged through her as she realized that she was helpless and alone, having sent Ella home. She gasped for breath when he finally released her mouth. She tried to scream but he clapped one hand over her mouth before she could draw another breath, the other hand moved to the buttons of her blouse which he started to rip open. Palo swore loudly and pulled his hand back when she bit it, giving her an opening. She screamed as loudly as she could and pushed against him with all her might. But all she succeeded in doing was angering him.

“Don’t fight me, Padmé,” he warned her as she moved away from him again. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I am going to take what I want, what I should have had months ago.”

Padmé shook her head as she tried to back away. “You’ll regret this, Palo,” she told him, trying to compose herself, pulling the top of her blouse closed.

“No I won’t,” he replied with a lurid smile as he trapped her against the desk once more. ‘I’ll enjoy every minute of it,’ he told her as he pressed his body to hers again. “Now be a good little senator and cooperate,” he told her, his hands moving up over her body, pulling her blouse open again. “It will only hurt if you fight me.”

“No!!” she screamed as she felt his knee pushing her legs apart as his hands ripped her blouse open, his mouth pressing into the soft flesh of her exposed body. And then, without warning, he stopped. No, he didn’t stop— he was stopped, and his body was hurled against the wall like a rag doll. Padmé got up, staring at Palo, not understanding until she heard a voice from behind her.

“Move away from him, Senator.”

She whirled around to see Darth Vader standing in the doorway, his yellow eyes boring into Palo menacingly. She nearly wept with relief as she stumbled away from the desk, her body trembling.

“Are you unharmed?” he asked her, the tone of his voice not giving her any hint as to whether he cared or not.

“Yes,” she stammered as she pulled her blouse together. “I... I think so.”

Vader nodded, his eyes not leaving Palo who was starting to come around. Vader moved over to the desk and lifted Palo with the Force, his invisible grip around Palo’s throat. Palo opened his eyes, which filled with fear and loathing when he saw Vader standing before him.

“And you call me an animal,” Vader growled as he tightened his grip.

Palo wanted to retort, wanted to rage at Vader, but he couldn’t breathe, and could only grasp at his throat desperately.

“Don’t kill him.”

Vader turned to look at Padmé, who stood beside him now. Even from where he stood he could see that she was trembling, the bruises around her mouth and on her neck making him more angry. “You can’t be serious,” he retorted. “After what he did to you?”

Padmé looked at Palo, intense sadness in her eyes. “Don’t kill him,” she said again as tears filled her eyes. She had never dreamed Palo would do such a thing to her, and it made her wonder just how well she actually knew the man she came so close to marrying. “Please,” she said, tentatively putting a hand on Vader’s thick forearm.

He frowned, not understanding how she could show compassion for a man who had so nearly raped her, and yet she seemed sincere. He released Palo, who fell to his knees at once, gasping for air. “*You’re* the animal, Corrino,” he growled. “Not fit for decent society. And if I ever see you within a thousand meters of Senator Amidala again, I will not hesitate to crush every organ in your body. Do we understand one another?”

Palo looked up at Vader, the hatred clear in his eyes. “Go to hell,” he spat.

Vader smirked at him. “You first,” he said, releasing a blast of blue energy in Palo’s direction. Palo’s body jerked around violently as the Sith lighting ripped through him.

“Stop it!” Padmé cried, grabbing Vader’s arm again.

Vader only stopped after a few more seconds, wanting more than anything to kill Palo where he lay. But he didn’t, and released the pathetic man who lay unconscious on the floor.

Vader walked over to the comm. embedded on Padmé’s desk and contacted security. “Get up to Senator Amidala’s office at once,” he said. “She’s been attacked.”

“Right away sir!”

Vader turned to Padmé. “Do you require medical attention?” he asked calmly.

She shook her head. “No,” she said quietly. “A... a change of clothing would be nice, though,” she said.

Vader nodded. “I’ll take you home,” he said, removing his cloak. “Put this on,” he told her, handing her the enormous garment.

Padmé was surprised by the gesture, and took it, only too happy to cover herself up with it. Security guards rushed into the room at that moment, surprised to see Darth Vader standing there.

“Arrest that man,” Vader said. “He assaulted the senator.”

The two security guards didn’t question Vader, and simply hauled Palo to his feet and dragged him out of the room.

“Let’s go,” Vader told her as she rolled up the sleeves of the huge cloak. He started towards the door.

“Thank you,” she said as she followed behind him. Vader glanced back at her, but didn’t answer, and simply continued to stride out the door, forcing her to hurry to keep up with him.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Vader could feel the waves of despair washing off of Padmé as she sat beside him in the speeder. He looked at her from the corner of his eyes, but she was looking in the opposite direction, no doubt not wanting him to see that she was crying.

“Are you injured?” he asked her again, not sure what else to say at this point.

“It’s nothing,” she assured him. “I’ll be fine. I’m sure I must look awful though.”

“The bruises only show so much because you’re so fair,” he commented. When he’d first come to live with Palpatine he’d suffered more than his share of bruises; but the tan he stole bore from his years on Tatooine made them less conspicuous than hers did. Somehow he didn’t think that would be of any comfort to her.

“Why were you at my office?” she asked.

Vader turned to look at her. “I would think you’d be happy that I was,” he commented.

“I am,” she replied at once. “I mean, if you hadn’t come when you had, Palo would have...” she stopped as the tears prevented her from continuing.

“He would have raped you, there’s no doubt of it,” Vader finished the sentence for her.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “Maybe he wouldn’t have been able to go through with it, maybe he...”

“Don’t give him the benefit of the doubt, Senator,” Vader interjected. “I saw the thoughts in the man’s mind. He would have taken you in any manner he could, I promise you.”

Padmé knew he was right, but hated the thought that Palo could be so cruel. “He told me he loved me,” she said, more to herself than to him. “How could he do something like that if he loved me? It doesn’t make any sense!”

“Sex has nothing to do with love,” he told her. ‘And believe me, that’s all he wanted.’ He paused for a moment. “I did try to warn you, if you’ll recall,” he couldn’t resist adding.

Padmé frowned. “Yes, I remember,” she retorted. “The very conversation that created this situation,” she added.

“Ironically yes, it was,” Vader replied.

Padmé was irritated by his cavalier attitude. While she appreciated what Vader had done, she had to wonder why he had. He had made it clear that he didn’t care about her; he admitted as much. So why had he stopped Palo?

Vader heard her silent question, but did not offer her any explanation.

“I came over to take you...shopping,” Vader told her at last, remembering her question.

“Shopping?”

“Yes,” he replied. “For a wedding gown.”

“But... isn’t it rather soon to be thinking about that?” she asked.

“No,” he replied as he set the speeder down on the landing platform outside her apartment. “We’re getting married next week, after all,” he informed her as he got out of the speeder. He came around and opened the passenger door, enjoying the look of shock on Padmé’s face as she stared up at him.

“Are you coming?” he asked.

Padmé nodded, and then stepped out of the speeder. She said nothing for a moment, the shock of his announcement preventing her from doing so. She needed time to think, to regroup; but right now all she wanted to do was have a shower.

“I’m going to get cleaned up,” she told him as they walked into the apartment. “I feel filthy,” she added quietly.

Vader simply nodded and took a seat on one of the couches. “Take your time,” he said.

Padmé removed his cloak and handed it back to him. “Thank you for this,” she said, handing it to him.

Vader took the garment from her, not even glancing at the way her blouse was gaping open indecently.

Padmé noticed this, and it surprised her. However at this point she’d just as soon do without any male attention of any kind, and headed to the fresher for a shower. Once she was under the warm stream of water, she commenced scrubbing herself with soap. She had never felt so filthy in her life, and felt as though Palo’s hands and mouth were still upon her body, touching her in a way no man had ever done before. Padmé winced when the water made contact with the bruises on and around her mouth. Finally when she was satisfied that she had cleaned every centimeter of her body, she simply stood under the water and closed her eyes. *How could you have done this to me, Palo?? How?* She closed her eyes, the horror of what had so nearly happened to her came crashing down upon her, and a sob burst forth from her. And then another, and another. Covering her face with her hands, she finally gave full vent to her misery. Her entire body convulsed as she sobbed violently. All the events of the previous twenty-four hours hit her full force; Vader’s visit, the way he had cornered into make a dire choice, the break up with Palo, and then the fall out of it all. She would never have imagined that Palo was capable of assault; and yet, he had attacked her. And if Vader had not arrived when he had, Palo would have raped her. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew that Vader was right. He’d warned her, he’d told her, however crudely, that Palo had wanted her. And while Padmé had know that about Palo, never would she have imagined that he would just take what he wanted from her. The fact that he so very nearly succeeded in doing so was both terrifying and heart breaking to Padmé. And yet, she needed to be strong now. Darth Vader was not going to just go away. He was in her life now, whether she liked it or not. And from the sound of it, was intent on making her his wife very soon.

Padmé took deep breaths to calm herself. She needed to get herself together, for Vader was waiting for her, no doubt wanting to discuss their wedding plans. *He wants to take me*

shopping for a wedding dress, she reflected, finding the thought of such a thing rather surreal.

Reaching back, Padmé turned off the water. She opened the shower door and stepped out, picking up a towel to dry herself off. She felt a little better now having had a good cry, and walked over to look at herself in the mirror. She frowned when she saw the swelling around her mouth, but decided it could have been worse. Far worse.

Leaving the fresher, Padmé walked into her bedroom to get dressed. She looked at the large bed that stood in the center of the room as she did so, reflecting that in a very short time she would be sharing it with Darth Vader. The thought of it made her shudder, and she pushed it from her mind and finished getting dressed.

Vader had made a full inspection of the apartment by the time Padmé returned, dressed and looking calmer than she had earlier.

“Nice place,” he told her.

Padmé nodded. “I’m very happy here,” she said.

Vader looked around. “I can see why,” he replied. He looked back at her. “You ready to go?” he asked.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

Vader nodded. “Chancellor Palpatine has...suggested we get married next week,” he told her.

Padmé sat down on one of the sofas. “Next week?” she asked softly. “Why? Why so soon?”

Vader sat down across from her. “Why not?” he asked. “What sense is there in putting it off?”

Padmé looked down at the hands in her lap. “None I suppose,” she replied quietly.

“Then let’s go and get you a wedding gown,” he said. “Unless you want me to pick one out for you myself,” he added.

Padmé looked up quickly. “No, I don’t want that,” she replied at once.

Vader smiled, knowing he’d won once more. “Then I guess we have some shopping to do,” he told her.

“Yes, so it seems,” she replied.

Vader stood up. “Shall we?” he asked, looking down at her.

Padmé stood up. “By all means,” she replied.

Vader started off towards the door, and then stopped as he remembered something. “I bought this on the way to your office,” he said, producing a small box from inside his cloak. “I understand it’s traditional.”

Padmé took the box from him. He watched her as she opened the small red box to reveal an enormous diamond solitaire. She looked up at him, her eyes betraying her shock at the size of the rock.

Vader smiled. "Does it please you?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" she asked.

Vader shrugged. "Not particularly," he replied. "Let's be off."

Padmé and Vader headed for shops in the most exclusive section of Coruscant. Padmé felt self-conscious wearing the ostentatious ring that Vader had presented to her, but knew that she daren't refuse to do so. In the short time she had known him she had come to realize that Darth Vader was nothing if not demanding. He made his wants very clear, and was relentless about getting them, no matter what. What did surprise her about him was that he seemed to value tradition. Engagement rings were an ancient tradition that very few people observed any more. And now here they were on their way to buy a wedding dress.

Vader parked the speeder and stepped out. Padmé watched him, wondering if he would open the door for her. And he did. The fact that he demonstrated gentlemanly tendencies was shocking to Padmé, for they were in stark contrast to the coldness of his mannerisms, the cruelty of his remarks.

"Coming?" he asked as he stood with the door open, looking down at her.

"Do I have a choice?" she remarked.

Vader didn't reply, and simply stood looking at her, the same cold expression in his glacial blue eyes.

"I didn't think so," she said and got up out of the speeder.

"Wait," he said as she started to walk off.

Padmé looked back at him.

"Don't you have some lipstick or something you can put on?" he asked her.

Padmé frowned. "Why?"

"Your bruises," he said. "They're pretty noticeable," he told her.

Padmé turned to look at her reflection in the speeder's window, touching her finger tips to her lips gingerly. "Oh no," she replied quietly. Opening up her handbag she routed around for a minute until she found a tube of lipstick. Looking into the reflection once more she applied the lipstick. It covered up most of the bruising, but not all of it. She looked up at him. 'That's the best I can do,' she replied. "Perhaps if we'd waited a day or so to do this they would have had a chance to fade," she added.

"Perhaps," he replied. 'But we don't have the luxury of time,' he informed her. "Let's go."

Padmé took her time, trying on every dress in the shop, deciding to make Vader pay for his impatience. *If he thinks he's bested me, he doesn't know me very well yet*, she reflected as she looked at herself in the mirror.

"Are you finished yet?"

Padmé walked over to the curtain that separated her from the viewing area and peeked around at Vader. "No," she told him.

Vader frowned. "Are you trying on every dress they have?" he asked, his annoyance clear.

"Yes," she replied.

"Is that necessary?" he asked.

"Yes," she told him, and then disappeared once more.

"I don't see why you won't let me assist you in your choice," he called from behind the curtain.

"You're not allowed to see the dress before the wedding," she told him as she turned and looked at herself in the mirror.

"That's idiotic."

"Perhaps, but it's tradition," she told him.

She wasn't sure, but she could have sworn she heard him swear. This made her smile. Her smile grew when the droid assisting her brought in two more gowns for her to try on.

Afternoon was turning to evening by the time Padmé had made a decision. By that point it had become a battle of wills between her and Vader, both not willing to give a centimeter to the other. Padmé was pleased, however, by the definite look of annoyance on Vader's face when they finally left the boutique, having ordered her gown to be delivered to the apartment the next day.

"I'm hungry," she said as they got into the speeder.

Vader frowned, biting back an acerbic come back. "Dinner then, Senator?" he said.

She looked at him. "Is that an invitation?"

Vader expelled a loud breath. "What do you think?" he asked shortly.

Padmé smiled, enjoying his petulance. "Well I suppose so, in that case," she replied. "I have to eat after all."

"Delightful," he muttered as he started up the speeder.

Padmé merely continued to smile, turning to look out the window as the speeder lifted off.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Padmé felt as though every set of eyes in the restaurant was upon her as she followed the serving droid to a table, Darth Vader at her side. Vader was notorious, and well known throughout the galaxy. His face was on the holonet news almost daily, and he seemed to thrive on all the attention. Padmé, on the other hand, hated attention, avoided the media, and did her best to keep out of the public eye as much as possible. But now that she was engaged to Vader, how easy would that be?

"I hope this table is to your liking, Lord Vader," the droid said as it stopped at a cozy table with a spectacular view of the cityscape.

"It will suffice," Vader replied as he pulled out a chair for Padmé, once again surprising her with his manners.

Padmé sat down and looked at the holographic menu which was projected above the table. She glanced at Vader, who was looking around the restaurant, almost as though he were already bored with her company. No doubt the meal would be eaten in awkward silence, for it seemed that Vader's ability to carry on a civil conversation was seriously lacking.

"Good evening, Lord Vader," the maître d' gushed as he appeared at their table. 'It is an honor to serve you tonight!' he turned to Padmé, his eyes nearly popping out of his head when he recognized her. "And Senator Amidala!" he exclaimed. "A double honor! Two such distinguished guests at the same table in our humble establishment is..."

"Bring us a bottle of wine," Vader cut him off. "White. Dry. From Naboo if you have it."

"Of course, my Lord," the maître d' effused. "An excellent choice! I'll choose one myself!"

The man scurried away, leaving them alone again.

"You drink wine from Naboo?" she asked.

"On occasion," he replied as he set to studying the menu. "There are few wines that are comparable in quality."

Padmé cocked an eyebrow, realizing that this was as close to praise as Vader would come. "For once we agree on something," she quipped.

Vader moved his eyes from the menu to her face briefly and then back to the menu, making no reply.

Padmé sighed, realizing that this would be her life from now on; married to a sullen, distant man who showed her no hint of emotion, who offered little in the way of companionship or even conversation. She felt her throat constrict with sadness as she recalled the many wonderful times she'd shared with Palo, how animated and companionable he was. They'd eaten together at this very restaurant many times she reflected as she looked around.

He always bought her a single rose from the little boy selling them in the lobby. She pushed the thoughts away from her mind, deciding that dwelling on the past would only serve to make the prospect of her future more dismal. She returned her attention to the menu, glancing at Vader as she did. She was startled to see that he was watching her, the expression in his eyes one of veiled hostility.

“Stop thinking of him,” he told her.

Padmé frowned. “Stop invading the privacy of my thoughts,” she countered.

“I’ll read your mind whenever I wish,” he told her. “Get used to it.”

Padmé narrowed her eyes as she held his icy stare. “Okay, read this thought then,” she told him. *I hate you, I will always hate you, and nothing you can do will ever change that.*

To her utter aggravation and infuriation Vader actually smiled at this. “Do you think that will hurt my feelings, Senator?” he asked her.

“You don’t have any feelings,” she countered, and then looked up as the maître d’ arrived at their table with the bottle of wine. He made a grand show of showing them both the label, and then poured a wee bit into a glass so that Vader could taste it. He did so, his eyes not leaving hers, their expression never changing for a moment.

“It’s fine,” he said as he set his glass down.

The maître d’ was obviously well acquainted with Vader’s brevity of words, and took this as high praise. With a smile of gratification, he poured them each a glass, and then set the remainder in an ice bucket beside the table.

“Enjoy your meal,” he said with an obsequious bow, and then left them.

Vader lifted his glass. “Shall we drink to our marriage, Senator?” he asked in a scornful tone.

Padmé glared at him. “You make a mockery of that word,” she told him in a low voice. “You are using it as another weapon in your arsenal to inflict pain upon others. Marriage is meant to be a union between two people who love one another; it’s a sacred bond, a commitment based on love, respect, and mutual caring. You may marry me, but you will never have any of those things from me, I promise you that.”

Vader listened to her tirade, and then downed the contents of his glass. “Are you finished?” he asked, setting it down.

Padmé didn’t answer, but made a point of pushing her glass away.

Vader leaned closer to her, making sure he had her full attention before continuing. “Did Corrino respect you when he forced himself upon you, Senator?” he asked. “Was that a sign of caring?”

She looked away, unable to face him any longer.

“And as for love,” he continued, uttering the word with absolute scorn, “I know you did not love him, so don’t try to tell me otherwise. If you did, the thought of sex with him wouldn’t have repulsed you as it did.”

Padmé looked back at him, the hatred filling her. “You know nothing,” she spat. “You have no idea what love is, you are incapable of feeling anything at all except anger and hatred and contempt. I did love Palo, I love him still. What he did to me was horrible, but he was drunk, he was hurting, and...”

“Spare me,” Vader said, cutting her off angrily. ‘I was there, remember? I saw the way he was tearing at your clothes, the way he was forcing you onto your desk,’ he told her. “I saw the intent in his mind, Senator; and believe me, the thoughts I saw there were not of love, and caring and respect. They were of power, of control, of lust; he only wanted to use your body, Senator. He didn’t care if he hurt you in the process.” He leaned closer. “He wanted to screw you, Senator, just as I told you he did. And if I hadn’t arrived when I had, he would have done just that. Just as he had done on that very desk many times with that whore you hired as your assistant.”

Padmé’s eyes widened at this last comment. “What... what are you talking about?” she cried. “What do you mean?”

“I think you know exactly what I mean,” Vader replied. “Corrino and your assistant, I saw them in his mind when he was assaulting you. Only he didn’t rape her, he didn’t need to. She was quite a willing participant from what I could tell.”

“You’re lying!” she cried. “You just hate Palo and want me to hate him too!”

“I don’t give a damn about your feelings one way or another, Senator,” Vader replied coldly. “But I am growing tired of listening to you defend that piece of garbage Corrino. At least I’m honest about the way I feel; he’s a lying, two—faced bastard who probably never loved you a day in his life.”

Padmé had heard enough by this point. Picking up her glass of wine, she threw its contents into Vader’s face and then ran out of the restaurant, not caring if she was making a scene. She needed to get away from him; that was all that mattered to her at this point as she ran out of the restaurant.

Vader could feel the eyes of those around him looking at him, hear their whispers, and sense their shock. Part of him wanted to lash out at all of them, to ease his damaged ego; but that wasn’t a good idea. No, the chancellor would be most displeased if he had a temper tantrum in a public place. And when Palpatine was displeased, life was very unpleasant for Vader. He was still nursing burns from the last time he’d been punished by his master, and so he decided to push his anger deep inside of him and resist the urge to kill.

Standing up, Vader tossed a pile of credits onto the table and walked away, realizing that Senator Amidala was not going to be as easy to best as he’d first believed.

Padmé hailed a speeder cab and headed for the Senate building. She had to prove that Vader was wrong about Palo, and the security holos in her office would do just that.

Making sure the door was closed behind her, Padmé called up the security holos from the past three months, which was the time when Ella had first entered her employ. *It can’t be true... it just can’t be!* She thought as the holographic imaging device geared up. She watched herself at her desk, she saw Ella in the room with her, she saw Jar Jar Binks and others come in and out. *He’s wrong, there’s nothing here,* she thought as she scanned over the holos quickly. And then she saw something that made her stop. She saw Ella standing at the desk,

and then watched in shock as the young woman started to strip. A male voice was heard urging her on, telling her how beautiful she was, how much he wanted her. This only encouraged Ella more. And then the man came into view. It was Palo. Padmé watched numbly as she assisted him in disrobing. Before long she was laying back on the desk and Palo was standing before her, bending down to kiss her.

Padmé couldn't watch any more and turned it off, her hands trembling as she sat back in the chair. She felt numb, as though the very warmth had been withdrawn from her body. *He was right*, she thought in anguish; *Vader was right all along*.

"I'm glad you see that now."

Padmé looked up quickly to see Vader standing in the doorway. She had no idea how long he'd been there, for she was so absorbed in what she was doing that she hadn't noticed him. "How could he?" she asked aloud, not expecting an answer, least of all from Vader. "He's been carrying on with Ella for months! Right under my nose! How could he do this to me!?" she cried.

"He's a lecherous pig," Vader remarked. "One who has no control over his baser instincts. He lacks the integrity to be faithful to you or any woman, Senator. That's something you'll never need to worry about from me, I assure you."

Padmé looked up at him. "You've as much as told me that you don't care about me," she said quietly as tears rolled down her cheeks. "How do you expect me to believe that?"

Vader shrugged as he walked into the room. "Believe what you wish," he replied casually. "I rather hoped that you'd realize that, despite everything, you can trust me, Senator. I haven't lied to you, have I?"

"No," she replied.

"Nor will I," he assured her. "I may be many things, but a liar isn't one of them."

Small comfort that is, she thought miserably. "I want to go home," she said, standing up as the tears filled her eyes again. "Please take me home."

Vader watched her as she walked over to him. He knew how much she was hurting, how devastated she was having learned the truth about Palo. He knew that in most circumstances a woman would seek comfort when feeling this way; but he knew that she would rather die than ask for it, and he wasn't about to offer it. And so they left the office together but separated by a wide and seemingly insurmountable chasm.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

"I have passes to the theatre tonight," Vader told Padmé as they made their way to her apartment. "Perhaps an evening of entertainment will take your mind off of the... unpleasantness."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, perhaps," she found herself agreeing. 'We both need to change, though,' she told him. "I'm not dressed for theatre."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" he asked.

"Nothing but you smell like wine," she told him.

Vader looked down at the wetness on his clothing, remembering the incident in the restaurant. "Ah yes," he replied. 'I suppose I will have to change too then.' He looked at his wrist chrono. "We haven't much time," he noticed.

"I won't be long," she told him as he came to a stop outside her apartment.

"Famous last words," he quipped without a hint of a smile.

Padmé looked up at him as he helped her out of the speeder. "You don't know me very well, do you?" she remarked as she stepped onto the balcony.

"No, I suppose not," he replied.

"Then don't be so quick to judge," she told him as they walked into the apartment. They were met there by Dormé, Padmé's most trusted handmaiden from her days as queen of Naboo. Dormé looked at Vader, having learned from her mistress the previous night of the mess that Palo had created.

"This is my dear friend Dormé," she told Vader. "She lives here with me."

Vader nodded and looked at Dormé. "For now," he said.

Dormé frowned, and looked at Padmé.

"We'll discuss this later," she told Dormé, and then gave Vader a hard look. 'I'll be right back,' she told him. "Dormé, please assist me."

Dormé nodded and then followed her lady out of the room while Vader took a seat and waited for what he was certain would be a long time.

"Milady, your face!" Dormé said as she looked at Padmé's reflection in the mirror.

Padmé looked at her face, dismayed to see that the bruises on and around her mouth were more evident now than earlier.

"What happened?" Dormé asked, gasping when she noticed the red marks on Padmé's neck and chest. It was pretty obvious what had caused them. 'It was Vader, wasn't it?' Dormé

asked. "Oh Milady, please tell me he didn't force himself on you!"

Padmé shook her head. "No, it wasn't him," she replied. "It was Palo. He assaulted me, not Vader."

Dormé's eyes widened at this. "What?? Mr. Corrino? No, it can't be! He wouldn't hurt you, Milady; he loves you!"

Padmé frowned. "He would and he did," she replied. "And if Darth Vader hadn't arrived when he had, Palo would surely have raped me. He was drunk out of his mind, Dormé, and totally out of control."

"Oh Milady, I'm so sorry," Dormé replied as she started unpinning Padmé's hair. "I don't understand how he could do such a thing. He loves you so much!"

Padmé fought back the tears at these words. "I thought so too, Dormé," she said as she stood up. "But I learned something earlier that has made me question if he ever loved me."

Dormé watched Padmé as she started to undress and then walked to the closet to find an appropriate gown. "What are you talking about?" she called to Padmé.

"Palo was having an affair with Ella," Padmé replied.

Dormé emerged from the enormous closet with a black gown in her hands. Her face was a picture of shock as she stared at Padmé. "What??" she cried. "What makes you suspect such a thing?"

"I saw the security holos, Dormé," Padmé replied, taking the gown from her. 'I saw them, Dormé, together, on the desk in my office.' She stopped as the anger and betrayal filled her once more. "What a fool I've been!" she cried bitterly. "This has been going on for weeks, months even! And I had no idea!"

Dormé shook her head, too shocked to know what to say. "I'm so sorry, Milady," she said at last. "Maybe you should have let Vader kill him when he wanted to," she suggested.

Padmé stepped into the gown with Dormé's assistance, saying nothing for a moment. "That would be murder," she said at last. "As monstrous as Palo's actions have been, I cannot condone that."

Dormé wasn't terribly surprised by Padmé's response, for she knew her mistress to be a woman of unwavering moral standards. "Well, perhaps being married to Darth Vader won't be so bad," she suggested. "He's very handsome, after all."

Padmé couldn't deny that; Vader was a striking man. "Looks aren't everything, Dormé," she replied.

"No," Dormé agreed as she set about pinning Padmé's hair up in an elaborate do. "But it doesn't hurt either."

Padmé shook her head with a smile. Dormé had always been an incurable romantic, something Padmé took great delight in teasing her about.

"Who knows? Perhaps you will fall madly in love with the infamous Darth Vader," Dormé continued with a smile.

Padmé actually laughed out loud at this. “Dormé, you’re too much,” she said as she applied some lipstick. “I can promise you that I will never feel anything but resentment and hostility towards Darth Vader. That’s my guarantee.”

Dormé made no response except a smile.

Vader had started to pace up and down in the large, central room of the apartment, his impatience mounting. He looked at his wrist chrono, noting, to his dismay that the opera was due to start in less than an hour. He had half a mind to barge right back to Padmé’s bedroom to motivate her to move faster when she finally appeared.

The floor length gown of black silk served as a perfect contrast to her alabaster white skin, the cut of the garment showing her figure to perfection. Her chestnut locks were piled high upon her head, revealing her graceful neck and bare back.

Vader would have to be blind not to notice how beautiful she was. He’d noticed when he first saw her without the ridiculous make up she wore while she was queen of Naboo. He’d noticed when he saw her at the Gathering the previous week. But noticing and letting it affect him were not the same thing, and he was determined she would not affect him, no matter how good she looked.

“Finally,” he said, picking up her cloak from the couch. “Can we go now?”

Padmé looked back at Dormé as if to say I told you so. “Yes, we can,” she replied as he helped her with her cloak. ‘We’ll be late if we don’t hurry,’ she couldn’t resist adding. “You still need to change, remember,” she added. She walked towards the landing platform, leaving Vader standing behind her. He rolled his eyes in exasperation and then followed her out of the room.

“Where do you live?” Padmé asked as he directed the speeder away from her building.

“Not far from the Senate building,” he told her. “We’ll have to hurry. You said you’d be fast.”

“I was fast,” she said. “Do you have any idea what a hair style like this entails?”

Vader glanced at her briefly. “A gravity repulsor?” he replied.

Padmé couldn’t help but laugh at his comment. “Not quite,” she replied.

Vader said nothing more, her laughter having thrown him off for a moment. She was not at all what he expected, and he was finding that he needed to adjust his tactics moment by moment. *This is going to be exhausting*, he realized with a frown.

It wasn’t long before Vader pulled the craft up beside a tall building, one Padmé had seen many times on her way to the Senate.

“Now, I won’t be long,” he told her as they reached the security door. He keyed in his code and the door opened, revealing a small but neatly appointed apartment. “Wait here,” he said as he ran off to get changed.

Padmé took the opportunity to look around, hoping to learn something about the man she was committed to marry. But the apartment was quite spare, comprised of only the

necessities. She found it odd that there was not one holographic image anywhere, not even one. Did the man have no family? Surely he must; everyone had parents, after all.

“Let’s go,” Vader said as he returned.

“That was fast,” she commented.

“Yes it was,” he said, running a hand through his unruly hair. “See? Hair’s all done,” he commented as he opened the door to the apartment for her.

It was Padmé’s turn to roll her eyes this time.

The theatre lobby was crowded with well dressed patrons of a variety of alien species when Vader and Padmé arrived.

“Looks like we made it,” Vader said as he helped Padmé off with her cloak.

“I told you we had plenty of time,” she told him as he draped her cloak over his arm.

“You did not,” he retorted. “You said I took too long.”

Padmé suppressed a smile. “Well, you did,” she couldn’t help but say as Vader took their respective cloaks to the coat check.

Vader simply walked away, trying not to let her get under his skin.

“Padmé! I’m glad you’re here,” Mon Mothma said as she came up to her. “I’ve been hearing the most outrageous rumors about you on the news! Honestly, where do these people get this nonsense? They claim that you’re engaged to Darth Vader of all people!”

Padmé looked at Mon Mothma with a small, self-deprecating smile, and then over at Vader who was making his way back to her. “It’s true, Mon,” she told her. “I am engaged to Darth Vader.”

Mothma stared at her. “What?? But... what about Palo? I don’t understand!”

Padmé looked over Mon Mothma’s shoulder as Vader came to stand behind her. “It’s a rather complicated situation,” Padmé told her, looking at Vader who was listening with great interest.

Mon Mothma turned around and was startled by Vader’s sudden appearance. “I suppose so,” she replied. ‘I understand congratulations are in order, Lord Vader,’ she said. “I hear you and Senator Amidala are engaged.”

Vader nodded. “Yes we are,” he replied simply. “Come on, they’re about to start,” he told Padmé, reaching over and taking her hand.

Mon Mothma watched as Vader directed Padmé away, more than a little concerned for her friend’s welfare.

“I wonder how she knew already,” Padmé pondered as they found their seats.

“The Chancellor made a public announcement this morning,” Vader told her as he sat down beside her. “The whole republic knows now, Senator.”

Padmé looked at him quickly. “You mean... my parents know? They found out on the news??”

“More than likely, yes,” he replied, trying to get comfortable. “Is that a problem? They were bound to find out sooner or later.”

“I should have been the one to tell them,” she retorted. ‘What must they think? They love Palo!’

Vader snorted. “Somehow I doubt they’ll love him when they find out what he did to you, Senator,” he replied.

Padmé considered this, and realized that he was right. Her father would no doubt want to castrate Palo when he found out what he’d done. Vader watched her, reading her thoughts quite easily. He’d discovered that when she was in a highly emotional state she let her guard down, leaving her mind open to be read. He smiled. “I’d be happy to do that for you if you like,” he told her.

Padmé looked up at him. “Do what? What are you talking about?”

“Castrate Corrino,” he told her as the lights started to dim. “A lightsaber would do a rather tidy job I think,” he added.

Padmé turned back to the stage, shaking her head at his comment. “Too tidy,” she remarked. “A dull edged butter knife would be better.”

Vader was surprised by her comment and laughed out loud, causing a few heads to turn and look at him in disapproval. “That could be arranged too, Senator,” he said quietly, leaning towards her so only she could hear.

Padmé didn’t reply, but smiled in the dark room as the opera began.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

The first act of the opera was very long, and by the end of the hour the audience was more than ready for an intermission.

"I need to go say hello to the Chancellor," Vader told Padmé as they stood up. "He's expecting me to."

Padmé was surprised that Vader felt obligated to anyone, but said nothing. Besides, she welcomed a break from him, however short it may be.

As Padmé made her way to the corridor to mingle with friends and colleagues, Vader made his way to the private box of the Chancellor. He was met at the entrance by Mas Amedda, the Chancellor's personal aide. Vader hated the obvious panderer, and made no attempts to hide how he felt.

"Move aside," he said simply.

Amedda smirked, something he only did when he had something on Vader. "The Chancellor had a rather interesting conversation with the ambassador from Emerido earlier," he said.

"So?" Vader replied.

"Apparently the ambassador was dining at a rather posh restaurant earlier this evening when he witnessed a rather interesting spectacle," Amedda continued, relishing every word.

Vader did a good job of remaining calm, at least outwardly. "Why would I give a wookiee's ass about that?" he snarled as he shoved Amedda aside.

"Oh I'm sure his Excellency will fill you in," Amedda said to Vader's back.

Vader ignored the jibe, and walked into the darkened booth. There were other dignitaries present; the Chancellor liked to surround himself with admirers and sycophants constantly. Vader stood off to the side, waiting for Palpatine to acknowledge his presence.

Palpatine had sensed Vader enter the room, for the young man's Force presence was unmistakable. And yet he let him wait, knowing that Vader was growing anxious to be acknowledged. He enjoyed the mind games he played with his young apprentice, almost as much as he enjoyed debasing him with both physical and psychological punishment. Palpatine was no fool; he knew that Vader's own powers far exceeded his own now. And yet, Vader had been virtually raised by Palpatine, and had come to accept him as his master. Perhaps a day would come when he would challenge his master; such was the way of the Sith, after all. But for now, Vader knew his place, and accepted his master's castigation and derision stoically.

"Ah, Lord Vader," Palpatine said at last, turning to him finally as the small group he was entertaining stood up to stretch their legs. "Come and sit."

Vader waited for the others to shuffle out of the booth before he moved over and took a seat.

“How kind of you to come and say hello,” Palpatine said in a saccharine tone that indicated he was displeased.

“We arrived too late to do so before the concert began,” Vader explained. “We barely made it to our seats before the curtain rose.”

“Yes, I noticed,” Palpatine replied. “Seems your fiancée has you on a short leash, Vader,” he remarked sourly.

Vader frowned. “That is not so,” he responded. “The Senator is very much under my control, Master. I promise you.”

Palpatine’s expression darkened. “That isn’t what I hear,” he retorted. ‘I happen to know what went on earlier at a certain eating establishment,’ he went on. “It seems Senator Amidala made quite a public fool of you, Vader. It makes me wonder who is controlling whom.”

“I assure you, that she...” Vader began, but was cut short by a powerful blast of Sith energy directed at his midsection from the tips of Palpatine’s bony fingers.

“Silence!” he snapped. He held Vader in his thrall for a moment longer and then released him, enjoying the pain and hatred he felt emanating from the chastised young man. “Do not presume to contradict me, Lord Vader,” he snapped.

“Forgive me, Master,” Vader panted, aftershocks of pain radiating through him still.

“You told me that you would control Amidala,” Palpatine continued. “If you cannot do that, then you will not marry her, is that clear?”

“Yes,” Vader replied quietly.

“I need not remind you that there is not to be any physical relationship between you and her,” Palpatine continued. “Although I worry that you are too weak to be able to resist the temptations of the flesh,” he added derisively.

“There will be no physical relationship, my Master,” Vader assured him. “She wants me as little as I want her, I promise you.”

Palpatine narrowed his eyes as he regarded his young servant doubtfully. “I mean what I say, Vader,” he warned him. “Should you give me any reason to doubt you, I will kill her, and you may wish for death for your disobedience. Do I make myself clear?”

Vader could only nod as he fought to master the searing pain he still felt.

“Get out,” Palpatine said, turning away from him finally.

Vader stood slowly and then turned to leave.

“I’m watching you, Vader,” Palpatine reminded him. “Always watching you. Always.”

Vader left the booth and walked out into the corridor, leaning one hand on the wall for a moment. Hatred surged through him, making his sky blue eyes turn sulfuric yellow. He pulled

up his hood and looked around briefly for Padmé. Spotting her amidst a group of senators, he walked over to her.

“Let’s go,” he said brusquely, taking her by the arm.

Padmé looked up at him, startled by the sight of his eyes. “The second act isn’t due to start for another ten minutes,” she told him.

“I don’t care,” he retorted. “Let’s go.”

Padmé didn’t argue with him, seeing that he was clearly in no mood to be trifled with. She said goodbye to her friends and then left with him.

Vader said nothing as they returned to their seats, but Padmé could see that he was very angry. But there was more to it than mere anger. It almost seemed as though he was in pain. She looked up at him, but the cowl of his cloak hid his face from her, so she decided to wait until they were seated once more before questioning him.

“Is something wrong?” Padmé asked as they sat down.

“No,” Vader replied simply.

Padmé frowned. “Your mood is even more unpleasant than usual,” she commented. “Obviously something has happened to cause that.”

Vader made no reply, hoping that she would drop it.

“Fine,” she said at last. “If you insist on acting like a child, then go right ahead.”

Vader turned to her. “I am *not* acting like a child,” he growled. “Can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Rather hard to do that when you have forced me to come here tonight,” she countered, her eyes fixed on the empty stage. “Is it too much to engage in some simple conversation with your future wife?” she asked, putting a sarcastic emphasis on the word wife.

“With you there’s no such thing as simple conversation,” he replied. ‘You are always prying, always making insinuations and unwelcome observations,’ he grumbled. “It’s infuriating.”

Padmé rolled her eyes, and folded her arms tightly over her chest. As she did so she jostled his arm that was sitting on the armrest. He pulled it back at once, wincing in pain. His reaction did not go unnoticed by Padmé. She could see that he was in some sort of discomfort, but did not dare ask him about it again. He had made it quite clear that he didn’t want her concern or even her attention. *Being married to this man will be a living Hell*, she thought miserably as a lump formed in her throat. As much as she felt betrayed by Palo for what he had done to her, she still could not even consider allowing Vader to kill him, and she knew that if she called off their engagement he would undoubtedly kill Palo. And she would never be able to live with herself if she allowed that to happen.

The lights dimmed as the second act commented. Vader was relieved that the opera had put an end to Padmé’s interrogation. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye, frowning when he saw that she had unshed tears in her eyes. *Foolish woman*, he thought irritably as he turned his attention back to the stage. *Save your concern for someone who wants it, for I do not.*

The ride back to Padmé's apartment was awkward and uncomfortable for her. Vader had said nothing to her since the intermission, and she was beginning to wonder if he would speak to her again before the end of the night. Upon parking the speeder outside of the penthouse, he got out and then turned back to help her out, holding his hand out to her wordlessly. Padmé allowed him to help her, getting the impression that it pained him even to do that much.

Padmé walked into the darkened apartment, activating the lights with her movements. Vader followed behind her, a dull ache in his temples making his mood even more sullen than usual.

"Well, it's rather late," she said, anxious for him to leave. "So perhaps we ought to call it a night. I have an early meeting tomorrow," she added.

Vader nodded. "I'll have my things brought over tomorrow," he told her.

Padmé looked at him sharply. "What do you mean?" she demanded. "What ..things?"

"My belongings," Vader replied. "I'm moving in."

Padmé's mouth almost dropped open at hearing this. "You most certainly are not!" she retorted. "We are not married, not yet," she pointed out.

"You needn't worry about your precious virginity, Senator," he snapped. "I have no intentions of sharing your bed. But given the manner in which you were attacked earlier, I would think you'd welcome my protection."

His response surprised her, and she didn't reply for a moment. "But... Palo is in jail, right?" she said at last.

"For now," he replied. "But he has connections, Senator. Do you really want to trust that he won't try again?"

Padmé frowned, and felt a shiver go down her spine at the memories of what had happened earlier. "No," she said quietly. "I don't."

"Then it's settled," Vader said. "I will move in here tomorrow. Once we're married, your little maid servant will have to leave, however. I have no desire to share this apartment with two of you."

Padmé was about to reply but Vader turned and left her without as much as a goodbye. She watched as his speeder left the apartment's private landing pad and then sat down on one of the sofas, dropping her face into her hands as the emotions of the day finally caught up with her.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Darth Vader tossed his cloak onto the sofa in the small living room of his apartment. He sat down heavily, lingering effects of the Sith lightning still causing him discomfort. Bending over he pulled off his boots, leaving them on the floor. After pulling his tunic off, he stood up and headed to the shower. It was his hope that the hot water would help ease the ache in his muscles.

Standing under the shower, Vader let the pulsating stream of hot water massage the muscles of his back and shoulders. He almost felt guilty for enjoying the shower, for it had been so engrained in him from early childhood that physical pleasure of any kind was a sign of softness and weakness. Still, his master wouldn't know, and so Vader allowed himself the brief moment of relief.

Having dried off, Vader had just got into bed when his comlink sounded. Grumbling to himself he reached over to the small table beside his bed and picked it up, reasoning that only his master would be contacting him at such a late hour.

"Vader here," he said.

"Lord Vader this is Thalo Roseland, I'm the bailiff at the Senate detention center."

"What do you want?" Vader asked irritably. "Do you realize how late it is?"

"Yes, I apologize for that sir," the man replied. "But it's quite urgent. There is a problem with the prisoner you sent to us earlier today, one Palo Corrino."

"What problem?"

"Well sir, we can't hold him any longer," Roseland replied. "He's been here more than twelve hours now and..."

"What do you mean you can't hold him?" Vader interrupted angrily. "The man assaulted a woman, and would have raped her had I not intervened."

"Yes sir, I know that," Roseland replied calmly. "Perhaps you ought to come down here and I can explain it to you."

Vader sighed heavily, running a hand through his damp, tousled hair. "Fine," he snapped. "I'll be there shortly. Whatever you do, *don't* release Corrino."

"Understood sir. I'll see you shortly."

Vader arrived at the Senate building a short time later and proceeded to the detention center located in the lower level. It was a low security facility, meant to hold prisoners until they were transferred to a more permanent placement.

"Thank you for coming, Lord Vader," Roseland said as he met Vader at the front desk.

"You gave me little choice," Vader retorted. "What is the problem with Corrino?" he asked. "Why can't you hold him?"

"Well according to the law he must be charged in order to be detained for longer than twelve hours," Roseland explained. "Technically we've already held him longer than we had the right to, and unless a former charge is levied against him we have to let him go."

"Then by all means," Vader replied, irritated that the man was making something so simple into such a huge problem. "Charge him! Assault with an attempt to do rape. Done. Can I go now?"

"It's not that easy sir," Roseland replied. "Otherwise we'd have done that ourselves. I'm afraid the only person who can charge him is the victim."

Vader frowned. "You mean Senator Amidala?"

"Yes sir," Roseland replied. "She is the only one who can lay a formal charge, and a formal charge is the only means by which we can hold him over for a trial."

Vader cursed soundly. "Senator Amidala is my fiancée," he said at last. "Isn't it enough that I charge him?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," Roseland replied. "The senator herself must do so. And it has to be in person. There is paperwork that requires her signature."

"This is completely idiotic," Vader snapped. "It's the middle of the night! You expect her to come down here at this hour and..."

"I know it's an inconvenience sir," Roseland interrupted. "But if you want this man brought to justice, then there's simply no other way."

Vader cursed again, realizing that he'd have to do things by the book if he wanted to see Palo charged and made accountable for his crime. "I'll be back," he told the bailiff. Roseland watched as the imposing young man left the office with a flourish of his great black cloak.

Padmé was in the midst of a restive sleep when she heard the sound of her bedroom door opening. Knowing Dormé would never enter her room without knocking; Padmé sat up at once and reached into the drawer of her bedside table for her blaster. The lights came up and she was shocked to see Darth Vader standing at the end of her bed.

"What are you doing here?" she cried, pointing the blaster at him.

Vader almost looked amused as he looked at the tiny woman in a frilly white nightgown pointing a blaster at him.

"What are you planning on doing with that thing?" he asked condescendingly.

"Whatever I must," she replied. *Yes, that would make everything better, wouldn't it? Just kill him now, claim he was an intruder...that would end this nightmare right here and now...*

Vader's expression darkened as he sent the blaster crashing to the wall with a swipe of his hand. "Not a good idea," he told her.

Padmé was astonished by the speed with which he had disarmed her and her fears redoubled. "What do you want?" she asked quietly.

"I'm here to take you to the detention center," he replied. "Unless of course you want Corrino to be set free."

Padmé looked up at him, now totally confused. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Vader proceeded to tell her about what he had learned from the bailiff earlier. Padmé listened, her anxiety level increasing with each word.

"So if I don't press charges then Palo goes free?" she asked at last. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes," Vader replied. "So get dressed so I can take you there."

Padmé hesitated. "No," she said. "I... I don't want to press charges."

Vader looked at her incredulously. "What?? Why the hell not?"

Padmé wasn't quite sure how to respond. Part of her didn't want the press to get a hold of the story, for she had worked hard to protect her privacy. Part of her still felt guilty for having broken up with Palo; even after everything he'd done, she still hated the thought that she'd ruined his life.

"I... I just want him out of my life," she said at last. "I don't want to go through all this... I just want to forget it ever happened."

"You're mad," he told her with a frown. "You're willing to forget that he almost raped you? That he cheated on you?? Haven't you any pride at all?"

Padmé stood up to face him. "Yes, I have pride," she replied. "And if you'd think for a change rather than just reacting with violence..."

"It wasn't me who attacked you, Senator," he reminded her coldly, interrupting her.

"No," she replied. "Would you just stop for a moment and think about this? Do you really want everyone to know the particulars of our engagement? Because once charges are laid, the press will be all over this, I promise you."

Vader hadn't considered this, but, to his chagrin, realized that she was right. "Your point?"

"My point is, do you think it would be good for your public image if it was common knowledge that you had to blackmail me into marrying you?" she asked bluntly.

No, it would not... and my master would certainly not like another public humiliation, he pondered. "I suppose you have a valid point," he conceded at last. "As much as I hate to admit it," he hastened to add.

"Yes, I'm sure," she replied, relieved that he'd finally seen her point of view.

"I will go back and let them know your decision," he told her, turning to leave. "And then I will be back. You've given me no choice but to move in immediately."

"You said you would come tomorrow," she reminded him as he headed for the door.

"That was before you let Corrino go free," he retorted. "I'll be back later. Don't try to frighten me again with your weapon, Senator," he added with a hint of a smile.

Padmé gave him a dirty look as he left the room.

Palo looked up as he heard someone approaching his cell. He'd been shouting empty threats at the guards all night, but was secretly beginning to wonder if he would ever see the light of day again.

"Let's go Corrino," a guard said as he lowered the force field.

Palo stood up. "Where are you taking me?" he asked nervously.

"You have a visitor," the guard informed him. "I'm taking you to see him."

"Him??" Palo asked, expecting it to be Padmé who had come. "Who is it?"

The guard gave him a look that almost looked sympathetic. "Darth Vader."

Palo's pace slowed at once as he felt the fear well up within him. "What does he want with me?" he asked.

"Well since the woman you attacked is his fiancée, I'd say he wants plenty with you," the guard returned with a smirk.

Palo did his best not to appear as frightened as he was, and simply followed the guard into a reception room where Darth Vader stood waiting with arms folded over his chest.

"You have ten minutes," the guard told him, and then closed the room behind him.

"Enjoying the accommodations?" Vader asked as Palo sat down at the small table.

Palo didn't reply, doing his best to keep a modicum of dignity. Considering he'd vomited all over himself more than once over the past fifteen hours, it seemed a rather foolish thing to do.

"You stink," Vader said.

"What do you want, Vader?" Palo asked at last.

"I'm here to let you know that Senator Amidala has decided not to press charges," Vader told him. "As much as I disagree with her decision, I am not about to interfere."

"Yeah, right," Palo replied. "You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't give a damn what you believe," Vader responded calmly.

"So why did you feel the need to come here?" Palo challenged. "Why not just let the bailiff tell me?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," Vader replied as he sat down across from Palo. "My reasons are twofold actually," he continued. "First of all, now that you are free, I'm here to warn you not to come anywhere near Senator Amidala. I will not hesitate to kill you if you I see you within a thousand meters of her, do you understand?"

"You made yourself quite clear earlier when you nearly killed me in Padmé's office," Palo retorted. "I have half a mind to charge you with assault."

Vader actually laughed at this empty threat. "Thank you, I haven't had a good laugh in a while," he told him.

Palo's face reddened with anger and humiliation. "Your second reason?" he asked.

Vader's smile grew at this point. "I wanted to let you know just how much I enjoyed the Senator earlier," he told him.

Palo felt as though he'd had the wind knocked out of him. "You're lying," was all he could manage to say.

"Oh no," Vader continued. "I guess you just didn't do it for her, Corrino, because once I got her out of her clothes, she was all over me. She's really quite insatiable, actually. Of course, the first time was uncomfortable for her, being a virgin and all. But once that was out of the way, she enjoyed herself very much. As did I. Several times in fact."

"You filthy liar!" Palo cried, standing up and lunging at Vader. He was prevented from reaching Vader by the invisible grip of the Dark Lord's hand. Palo's hand flew to his throat as he slumped back down in his chair. Vader released him and stood up.

"Leave Coruscant tonight," he told the gasping man. "Or you'll live to regret it. But not for long, I promise you."

Palo struggled to catch his breath as Vader left the room, his hands trembling with anger.

Padmé paced in the large central room of the apartment, her anxiety level rising with each step. Dormé sat on one of the sofas, watching her lady, wringing her hands with worry.

"Why is he coming here tonight, Milady?" Dormé asked. "I thought he was coming tomorrow!"

"I told you why," Padmé replied. "He's worried that Palo will come over here now that he's been released."

"I still don't know why you didn't press charges," Dormé responded. "The man doesn't deserve your forgiveness, Milady."

"It's a little more complicated than that, Dormé," Padmé replied. "I don't need the press prying into my personal life, which is exactly what would happen if I pressed charges."

"I suppose," Dormé said. "Still, I..." she stopped when the lights from a speeder appeared at the large entrance way. "Looks like he's here," Dormé said, standing up.

Padmé nodded, watching as Vader jumped out of the speeder. He walked into the room, a haversack in his hand.

"Well? How did it go?" Padmé asked him.

"He's alive, if that's what you're asking," Vader replied.

"That's a relief," Dormé muttered.

Vader gave her a withering look. "I'd appreciate some privacy with Senator Amidala," he said in a tone that brooked no dissention.

Dormé was taken aback, and looked at Padmé.

"Go on to bed, Dormé," Padmé told her. "It's alright."

“Yes Milady,” Dormé replied. She gave Vader one last glance before leaving the room.

“Did you need to be so rude to her?” Padmé asked.

“Was I rude?” Vader asked, turning back to her.

“You know very well you were,” Padmé returned. ‘Anyway, it’s been a very long day,’ she said. “Let me show you to the guest room.”

Vader, who was every bit as tired as Padmé, didn’t argue and simply followed her out of the room.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

"Where is my mommy? Why can't I see her?"

"Your mother doesn't want you anymore, boy," the white haired man told him. "I offered her money and she sold you to me like the slave you are."

"My mommy would never do that!" Ani averred, fighting the tears in his eyes. "She loves me!"

"There's no such thing as love," Dooku told him unequivocally. "Lesson number one: no one loves you, no one cares. You must learn to rely only on yourself, for you're the only person who cares about you."

"If you don't care about me, why do you want me to come with you?" the confused boy asked.

Dooku patted the boy's head stiffly, as though the smallest amount of contact was immensely painful to him. "You are special, young Anakin Skywalker. One day you will be the most powerful man in the galaxy. I've come to take you to a great man, a man who will teach you everything you need to know."

Anakin didn't understand, but was too young to voice his questions. "Will I ever see my mother again?"

Dooku's expression turned cold. "No," he told him. "Forget you ever had a mother, boy. As far as she's concerned, you're dead. She has washed her hands of you, do you understand?"

"No," Anakin admitted, shaking his head woefully. But the white haired man offered no further explanation and simply left Anakin alone in the small cabin. He was cold, for it was cold in space. He was afraid, and missed his mother terribly. In his innocence he did not see that he was being lied to, that he was simply a pawn in the evil machinations of a master villain. All he knew was that he was cold, alone, and scared. "I miss you Mom," he said quietly to no one, trying his best to be brave. But it was hard to be brave when you were sadder than you'd ever been. Even the worst beating at the hands of Gardulla the Hutt hadn't hurt as much as this did...

Vader awoke with a start, his subconscious mind forcing himself into a wakened state. He was perspiring and trembling, the memories he had repressed for so long stealing upon his unprotected mind as he slept. He sat up, angry that he had dreamed of her, the mother who had tossed him aside like so much refuse.

It had been many years since Vader had thought of Shmi Skywalker with anything other than resentment and bitterness. He had learned his lessons well, his master having beaten or belittled anything resembling sentiment from him a long time ago.

Vader decided to get up, not wishing to return to the vulnerable sleep state lest he be troubled by more dreams.

Dormé had just sent breakfast on the table when Vader entered the dining room.

"I didn't know what you normally eat," she told him. "So I just made a few different things."

Vader sat down and took inventory of the spread before him. "This will suffice," he said simply.

Dormé lifted one eyebrow. "You're welcome," she retorted and then returned to the kitchen.

Vader was undisturbed by her remark and started in on the breakfast. Truth be told, the meal before him was far more appetizing than the plain fare he was accustomed to.

Padmé walked into the dining room, already dressed for the day. Vader glanced up at her briefly as she took her seat. He could see by the redness of her eyes and the paleness of her face that she must have spent much of the night crying. *Foolish woman*, he thought as he returned his focus to his breakfast.

"Good morning," she said as she sat down.

He looked up at her briefly. "You look terrible," he said simply.

Padmé frowned. "Thank you," she replied tersely. "You really know how to make a woman feel good about herself."

"I'm just stating a fact," he said calmly.

Padmé looked at him. He hadn't shaved yet, and he looked as though he himself had passed a rather restless night. "Well you don't look so hot either, come to think of it," she commented as she helped herself to breakfast.

Vader didn't look up at her. "I'm not as concerned about my appearance as you are," he remarked.

Padmé's eyebrows shot up. "I beg your pardon!" she replied hotly. "I am *not* concerned about my appearance!"

Vader looked up at her. "It's not an insult, just a..."

"Statement of fact, right?" she finished for him.

Vader nodded. "I've learned not to be so consumed with such superficial things," he told her, unable to resist one more jab.

Padmé sighed, deciding to ignore him.

"What time is your meeting?" Vader asked after a few moments of awkward silence.

"Oh nine hundred hours," she replied without looking at him.

"I'm on my way to the Jedi Temple," he told her. "I can take you to the senate first if you wish."

Padmé wasn't quite sure how to take his offer. Was he simply being courteous or was this his way of exacting control over her? "I don't know how long I'll be," she told him.

"Neither do I," he countered. 'We have some details to finalize,' he reminded her. "The wedding is in a few days."

"Yes I know," she replied. 'I thought the chancellor was taking care of all the details,' she continued. "All I need to do is just show up."

Vader narrowed his eyes as he watched her for a moment. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

Padmé shrugged. "No, just a statement of fact," she replied.

Vader shook his head, expelling a loud breath. "I presume you will want to invite some people," he said.

"Yes I suppose so," she replied. "Though I'm not sure if my family will come," she added quietly.

"You haven't spoken to them?" he asked. "You haven't told them what a disease Corrino really is?"

"No," she replied. 'Perhaps that might make them a little more willing to come,' she added. "I would like them here."

"You'd better contact them soon in that case," he said. "The wedding is coming up fast."

"Yes, I know," she replied, growing tired of his constant reminders. "Have you contacted your family? Will they be coming?"

Vader lowered his eyes to his breakfast. "No," he said simply.

Padmé was puzzled. "No? Why not? Why wouldn't they come?"

"I have no family," he told her in a low voice.

"Oh," she replied, feeling awkward. "No... parents? Not even a mother?"

"I said no," he snapped, looking up at her again.

Padmé was startled by the vehemence of his response, and realized that she must have struck a nerve. It was the first piece of information she'd manage to glean from this enigma who was to become her husband in a few short days. "I'm sorry," she said at last. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Vader frowned, her apology making his irritation only worsen. He stood up from the table suddenly. "I'm leaving now," he said. "If you want a ride, then you'd better hurry."

Padmé sat for a moment, too confused by what had just transpired to react. If she didn't know better, she'd think that Vader's family was a painful subject for him. But, as he would be quick to point out, he had no feelings, and therefore could feel no pain.

"You go on," she said. "I'm not ready to go just yet."

"Fine," he replied and then left the room without another word.

Darth Vader arrived at the Jedi Temple a short time later. Vader had been raised to distrust the Jedi, but also to tread very carefully where they were concerned. So long as the Senate held up the creation of a Republican army, Palpatine didn't allow his true identity, that of a Sith, to be discovered. The Jedi greatly outnumbered Palpatine and his young protégé; they would undoubtedly crush the Sith as it was known that they were quietly biding their time to take control of the Republic.

As for the Jedi, they regarded Darth Vader with a mixture of curiosity and caution. The young man had seemingly appeared from nowhere, for it had only been the last two years that he had been seen in public with the Chancellor. It was no secret to the Jedi that Vader was Force sensitive; very Force sensitive. And yet, he had never been trained. There was an edge to the young man, who, at age nineteen, seemed more cynical than most men twice his age. There was also darkness that many of the Jedi had sensed lurking behind the brilliant blue eyes of the unusual young man. Neither Jedi nor Sith, Vader was an enigma to most who knew him, even if only by reputation. The Jedi did not entirely trust Vader, and quietly resented his presence on the Jedi Council. Palpatine had appointed him as his liaison, citing that he was far too busy to be involved personally.

Vader was very careful to be on his best behavior when he was in the presence of the Jedi. No doubt they were aware of his reputation for coldness and occasionally even ruthlessness; Vader did not exactly shy away from the public eye. And yet, there was also an understated dignity about him that stood out in rather stark contrast to his less admirable qualities. All in all, the young man was an incongruity. Using a blatantly Sith name, almost as in defiance of social conventions, Darth Vader represented both tremendous potential and tremendous danger to the Jedi and the Republic itself. It was for this reason more than any that the Jedi were leery of Vader. He would make an exceptional ally, but he would also make a deadly enemy.

The Jedi masters were just taking their place in the round chamber as Vader entered the room. He was never late for a session, but did not make it a habit to arrive early either. Vader was not a terribly sociable man, and found it difficult to make conversation that didn't serve a purpose, a quality that his fiancée had pointed out to him quite plainly the previous evening.

"Good morning Master Yoda," Vader said as he took his seat beside the diminutive Jedi Master.

"Vader," Yoda replied with a nod of his head. "Surprised I was to hear of your engagement."

Vader wasn't certain how to respond. He could not let it be known that he was only marrying Senator Amidala as a means of exacting revenge. And so he smiled. "It happened rather quickly," he admitted.

"It must have," Mace Windu put in, sitting down beside Yoda. "The Senator was engaged to someone else only last week."

Vader looked at Windu. He knew that the man didn't trust him, and liked him less. Vader reciprocated the feelings in both regards. "Well, I suppose the Senator decided he wasn't the man for her," he replied.

Windu nodded. "I suppose not," he replied.

"I've known Senator Amidala since she was a child," Obi-Wan Kenobi spoke up at this point. "And have never known her to be rash in her decisions. Obviously she knows what she's doing."

Vader looked at Kenobi. Of all the Jedi, Vader disliked him the least. In fact, if he were honest with himself, he would have to admit that he admired the man. Unlike the other Jedi, who, in Vader's opinion, were far too self righteous and arrogant, Kenobi had a humility about him that Vader found refreshing. Of course, he would never admit this to anyone, least of all his master.

"Yes, she knows what she's doing," Vader said at last. "She's not a woman who can be manipulated. She's very intelligent, very strong willed." *Very pig headed*, he thought with a smirk.

"Yes, she is definitely strong willed," Obi-Wan agreed with a smile. "Good luck to you, Vader. And congratulations."

Senate Chambers

Padmé arrived early for her meeting. The events of the past few days had left her stressed and anxious, and she felt she needed the extra time to prepare herself.

Upon entering her office, she was unprepared for the flood of memories that hit her and she stopped in her tracks. The ugly incident with Palo was too fresh in her mind, and she reproached herself for returning so soon to the scene of her assault. And yet, she knew that she needed to put it behind her. Padmé had never been a person to back down from any challenge, or to let adversity stand in her way. This was not going to be the exception.

"Good morning Milady," Ella said as she entered the room. "I have that report you'll need for your meeting this morning."

Padmé made no reply, and Ella looked up. The look Padmé was giving her startled the woman, and she frowned. "Is there something wrong, Senator?" she asked.

"You must take me for a complete fool," Padmé said quietly as she entered the room, allowing the door to close behind her. "And I have been a fool, all these weeks; I've been a blind fool not to see what was going on."

Ella was unable to hide the alarm in her expression as Padmé approached the desk. "Milady, what are you talking about?" she asked, not knowing what else to say at this point.

"Don't insult my intelligence!" Padmé retorted angrily. "I know, Ella. I know how you and Palo have been carrying on behind my back for months now. How could you? You knew that he was my fiancé, how could you??"

"Milady, you're mistaken!" Ella cried. "I've never..."

"Don't even try to deny it," Padmé interjected. "You didn't know that this room is under constant surveillance," she added, pointing to a well hidden holocamera. "I saw you, Ella. I saw you and Palo on this very desk," she continued. "It makes me sick to think of it!"

Ella face reddened and she lowered her eyes, too ashamed to look her employer in the face any longer. "I... I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't know..."

“Don’t lie to me!” Padmé cried. “How could you not know?”

“No please,” Ella said, looking up. “Let me explain. I met Palo before you hired me, on Naboo. He seemed like a nice man, and, well, we hit it off. He never mentioned being in a relationship, I swear to you!”

Padmé felt sickened inside as she listened to the woman’s explanation, not doubting her for a moment. “And when you came to work for me? Didn’t the fact that he and I were together stop you?”

Ella lowered her eyes. “No,” she said, almost inaudibly. “I’m sorry... I don’t know what else to say.”

Padmé looked at her scornfully. “There’s nothing to say,” she stated flatly. “You’re discharged. Pack up your things at once and leave these offices. I don’t want to see you or him ever again.”

Ella simply nodded, wiping an errant tear as it made its way down her face. She left the office at once, leaving Padmé alone and shaking with anger. She walked over to the desk, as images of her own assault and the lurid holos jumped to her mind. She turned away and looked outside, trying desperately to force the images away. Ironically it seemed as though she had Vader to thank for saving her from making a terrible mistake by marrying Palo. It was likely that even their marriage wouldn’t have precluded him from carrying on with other women. She remembered how Vader had assured her that he would be faithful to her, and that she need never worry about him carrying on as Palo had. It seemed such an odd statement from someone who showed so little emotion. Vader was still very much an enigma to her. The rare moments of civility he displayed made her wonder if there was any change of ever getting beyond his hardened exterior. And if so, what would she find there? Surely there had to be more to Darth Vader than met the eye; surely there was a human heart under the layers of apparent indifference and scorn. Surely sooner or later he would lower his guard and show her who he really was. *Don’t count on it*, she told herself, folding her arms over her chest as she looked out at the city below her. *He’s as pig headed as they come, that man.*

The sound of the door opening made her jump, and she turned around, for once relieved to see the ridiculous Jar Jar Binks come loping in.

“Good mornin Senator Padmé,” he said with a smile. “Is yousa ready for de meetin?”

Padmé smiled. “Yes Jar Jar,” she replied. “I’m ready.”

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Jedi Temple-Coruscant

The meeting at the Jedi Temple went on much longer than Vader had hoped it would. It was the same old story; Vader put forth the Chancellor's concerns about the latest actions of Count Dooku and his growing army, and the Jedi countered with their concerns about escalating what was a controlled situation into a civil war. Sooner or later Vader realized that his master would find a way to create the army, with or without the approval of the Jedi.

I'm hungry, Vader thought, glancing at his wrist chrono. It was close to noon by now, and he found that his mind was starting to wander. *I wonder if Senator Amidala has had lunch yet*, he pondered. There was still so much to do to prepare for the wedding; Vader really had no idea what, but reasoned there were people who could help them ensure they had everything taken care of. *Wedding consultants? Is that what they call them?* He wondered, shocking himself that he'd even heard of such a profession. *Perhaps it might be a good idea to hire one, before she drives me completely mad*, he decided. *Am I mad already for insisting that she marry me? I must be...*

"Vader? Lord Vader?"

Vader looked over to see that Mace Windu was looking at him, and had obviously said something to him. The rest of the Jedi Council was looking at him with rather bemused expressions.

"Sorry," he said. "I was....preoccupied."

Windu cocked an eyebrow. "Yes, that was pretty obvious," he said. "I was just asking you if there was anything else you wanted to say before we wrapped up."

"No," Vader replied. "I think it's all been said."

Windu nodded. It was rather obvious to all that the young man's mind was elsewhere. "Well then in that case, let's adjourn for today."

Vader was only too happy to do so.

Senate Building

"Thank you for all your help, Jar Jar," Padmé said after her meeting had concluded. "I appreciate you filling in for Ella on such short notice."

"Issa my pleasure to be servin you, Milady," Jar Jar replied, pleased that Padmé had found him so helpful.

"Why don't you take an hour for lunch?" she suggested. "I'm sure you must be hungry by now."

"Oh yess, Milady!" the gungan declared emphatically. "Thank you, milady!"

Padmé smiled as Jar Jar loped out of her office to have lunch. She herself was rather hungry, but wanted to finish the last few details of the report she was working on. It wasn't long before she had the impression that she was being watched, and looked up quickly, startled to see Darth Vader standing in the doorway watching her.

"Don't do that," she said, returning to her work.

"What?"

"Startle me," she told him.

"That wasn't my intention," he assured her as he walked in and took a seat in front of her desk.

"I guess I'm still a little jumpy after what happened in here," she told him, glancing up at him briefly.

Vader nodded. "Understandably," he replied. "I'm surprised you can work in here at all."

She looked up at him. "You underestimate me," she told him.

"I suppose so," he admitted. The fact that she was proving to be far stronger than he'd realized frustrated him. He'd promised his master that he would break her, that he would have mastery over her. Was he kidding himself to think he could ever control her? Time would tell.

If Vader were completely honest with himself, however, he'd have to admit that he was rather pleased that Padmé was not a push over. He hated weakness in others, and the thought of marrying a woman who was weak willed and timid revolted him. He had always enjoyed a challenge, and in her he knew he'd found one.

"Have you eaten lunch?" he asked her after watching her work for a few moments.

She shook her head.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She nodded her head.

Vader frowned; growing annoyed that she wasn't paying him the attention he thought he was due. He lifted one hand from the armrest of the chair he sat upon and raised the datapad from her desk. She looked up at him in shock as he floated it easily to his hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

Vader looked at the report briefly. "I thought you said you were hungry," he said.

"Give that back to me," she demanded, holding her hand out.

Vader looked at her. If she didn't know better, she'd have sworn she saw mischief in his eyes. "And if I refuse?" he asked.

Padmé narrowed her eyes, thinking of a suitable retort. "I will call Jar Jar Binks in here and ask him to tell you all about his recent trip back to Naboo to visit his thirty seven first cousins," she told him.

At once the datapad floated back to her hand. Padmé smirked as she took it out of mid air and set it down on her desk.

"You're quite ruthless," he said with a straight face as he stood up. "I'm impressed."

Padmé wasn't sure how to take his comment. "I told you that you didn't know me very well," she replied.

"Obviously not," he said. "Are we going to lunch or not?" he finally asked.

"Is that an invitation?" she asked, unable to resist goading him further.

Vader rolled his eyes. "Yes," he said at last, the annoyance clear in his tone of voice.

She smiled. "Now, was that so hard?" she said, turning off the data reader. "Let's go. I'm starved."

"I didn't see your assistant around," Vader commented as he flew them to a nearby eating establishment.

"That's because I fired her this morning," Padmé replied. "I told her that I knew about her and Palo. She actually had the audacity to try to deny it!"

"Seems she's a good match for that scumbag Corrino," he remarked.

Padmé nodded. "I think she's pregnant," she told him. "She's been feeling poorly for almost a week now and her moods have been rather erratic."

Vader snorted. "Perfect," he replied. "Another Corrino to pollute the galaxy."

Padmé frowned. "If she is pregnant, I can't help but pity the poor child," she said. "Can you imagine being raised by the likes of her?"

Vader made no reply. Padmé wasn't terribly surprised by this, and looked out the window. "Well I hope Palo does the right thing by this child," she commented. "He's always wanted children, so hopefully he will welcome this one. Funny, I could never quite imagine having children with him, as much as I love them."

"Perhaps you knew on some level that you and he were not meant to be," he remarked.

Padmé looked at him. "Are you telling me that you think you and I are?" she asked pointedly.

Vader glanced at her, surprised by her question. "No," he replied. "I never intended on marrying anyone," he told her.

His answer didn't surprise her, and yet, at the back of her mind, she had to wonder what the point of it all was. Revenge had been served, Palo had been disgraced and punished, his life destroyed for all intents and purposes. Why go on with the sham of a marriage, when it was clear that there was nothing but animosity between them?

"So why are you so intent on marrying me?" she asked at last as he landed the speeder.

Vader got out and came around to open her door. "I never back down from a challenge, Senator," he replied.

Padmé frowned as she stepped out of the speeder. “Hardly a sound enough reason to...” She stopped when she saw a group of reporters approaching her and Vader, holocameras rolling.

“Great,” Vader muttered when he noticed them. ‘Brace yourself Senator,’ he said, turning to her. “Here come the vultures.”

Padmé looked up at him grimly, realizing that he was as annoyed by their unexpected presence as she was.

“Senator Amidala, Lord Vader, could you give us a few moments of your time?”

“Of course,” Vader replied, mindful of his public image. “So long as it’s only a few.”

Padmé half expected him to sweep them all away with a wave of his hand. She was surprised by his patience with the reporters as they asked questions about the particulars of their wedding.

“Yes, we did meet just recently.”

“No, we’re not planning a big wedding.”

“It’s in four days time.”

“No, we will not disclose the location.”

“We’re living here on Coruscant. No, we will not tell you where.”

After a dozen or so questions, Vader’s patience reached its limit. “That’s all,” he said finally. “No more questions.”

“Could we get a nice portrait shot, Lord Vader?” one of the bolder of the group asked.

Vader looked at Padmé. “What is he asking?” he asked her.

“He wants to take a holo of us together,” she told him.

“Oh,” he replied. He turned back to the man. “Go ahead,”

“Could you stand closer?” the man asked.

Vader could feel his blood pressure rising as he fought to maintain his calm. He took a step closer to Padmé, who seemed as thrilled as he did by the proximity.

“I don’t suppose you could put your arm around the Senator,” the man had the nerve to ask.

Vader’s brow creased every so slightly and he put an arm around Padmé’s shoulders.

“Beautiful,” the reporter beamed as the holo cameras snapped like mad.

“Give her a kiss!” one of the reporters shouted. He was quickly seconded by the others.

Vader didn’t know what to do. On the one hand, he was very aware that his public image was on the line. He had only recently been punished by his master for causing a scene in a restaurant; could he dare to refuse the request without causing another? And yet, the words of Palpatine were still fresh in his mind: *I need not remind you that there is not to be any*

physical relationship between you and her... Seems I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't, he realized.

"Neither Lord Vader or I are comfortable with public displays of affection," Padmé said at last, sensing how uneasy Vader was. "We'd appreciate it if you'd respect our feelings in this matter."

Vader looked down at her, grateful, for once, for her skills as a diplomat.

"Of course, Senator," the reporter finally relented, somewhat disappointed at not getting a juicy holo for his report.

Vader removed his arm from around Padmé's shoulders and took her hand, leading her past the group of reporters who took a few parting holos of the couple as they retreated into the restaurant.

As usual, they were shown to a table immediately upon entering the establishment. Neither said anything until they reached their table and Vader surprised Padmé by speaking first.

"You handled that well," he told her as he held out her chair for her.

Padmé shrugged. "I'm used to dealing with... volatile situations," she replied.

Vader sat down across from her. "Is that what you'd call that? Volatile?"

Padmé considered his question for a moment. "Well, yes," she said at last. 'I could see that you were very unhappy with their request,' she continued. "And I know what can happen when you're unhappy."

Vader couldn't help but smile at her comment. "You're very observant," he remarked.

"You don't get far in politics without knowing how to read people," she replied. "Although I have to admit that you are still a mystery to me in most respects."

Vader looked down at his hands resting on the table top. "There's nothing mysterious about me, Senator," he told her. "I promise you."

"I beg to differ," she replied. "For starters, why would you want to marry me? I know you wanted revenge against Palo, and you've had it. So why go through with it? You obviously feel nothing for me except perhaps some mild annoyance. So why do it? Why not just forget the whole thing and get your life back?"

Vader looked up at her. "I have my reasons," he said simply.

Padmé frowned, not liking his answer which, as usual, was vague to the point of infuriation. "Would you care to share them with me?" she asked. "I think I'm entitled to know at least one of them."

Vader pondered this for a moment, scanning over the menu that had appeared on the table top moments earlier. "You are an influential member of the Senate," he said at last, looking up at her once more, "and would make an impressive ally."

Padmé raised her eyebrows, surprised by his reply. "So this is a political merger in the guise of a marriage? Is that what you're telling me?"

“Does that make it any easier to accept?” he asked.

“I didn’t think that would matter to you,” she replied.

“It doesn’t,” he replied, looking back at the menu again, his expression telling her that their conversation was over. She looked down at her own menu as the invisible wall rose up between them once more.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

This is a profession? We're actually paying this man?? Vader's thoughts ran as he and Padmé sat in the apartment office of the only wedding planner on Coruscant who could promise to have everything ready on such short notice. Kasche Rienkam and his wife, Eiko worked as a team, but for the moment the man was speaking to Padmé and Vader alone as his wife did her best to calm a rather fussy infant in the adjacent room.

"She's teething," Kasche explained. "And miserable."

Padmé nodded in understanding. "How old is she?"

"Six months," Kasche replied. "A very cute age, except for the teething of course," he told them with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "I remember my nieces at that age," she said. "It is a cute age."

"Are you planning on having children yourselves?" Kasche asked, looking from Padmé to Vader.

"No," Vader replied. "Can we get on with the planning?"

Padmé looked at him in surprise. The thought of having children with him hadn't crossed her mind, and yet, once they were married, weren't children an almost inevitable result? Clearly Vader didn't want them, and Padmé found that this bothered her. A lot.

"Of course," Kasche replied, his face coloring slightly. 'Let's see, we were looking at flowers,' he said, looking at the list he had before him. He had just opened up a program that displayed a variety of flower arrangements when from the next room the sound of a lullaby being sung was heard. Kasche glanced over his shoulder as his daughter's crying started to abate. "Works every time," he told Padmé with a smile.

Padmé smiled too, and then stole a glance in Vader's direction. The look on his face surprised her. Vader was looking in the direction of the room where Eiko was singing the baby to sleep. The song she sang sounded familiar to him, and hearing it heralded fragments of memories that he'd been repressing for many years. Memories of his mother, of being sung to sleep by her, by this very lullaby, of nights being tucked in by her... *but she gave you away, remember? She sold you, she didn't want you...*

"Lord Vader?" Kasche asked.

Vader looked at him, shaking the memories from his mind. "Yes, that's fine," he said, not even knowing what he'd been asked.

Padmé watched him, getting the distinct impression that something was bothering him. She was confused, however, and had no idea what it could be. Just then Eiko appeared and joined her husband at the large table where he was seated with Vader and Padmé.

“Sorry about that,” she told them.

“Don’t apologize,” Padmé said. “Children take first priority. That was a lovely song you were singing,” she added.

Eiko smiled. “My grandmother used to sing it to me,” she told Padmé. “It’s a very old song from her home planet, Tatooine.”

Kasche could see by the look on Vader’s face that he had no wish to discuss lullabies, and returned his attention to the task before them. “Well, you have some decisions to make,” he said. “Let’s get down to it, shall we?”

Padmé could see that Vader was lost in thought as they made their way back to the apartment. She wanted to ask him what was bothering him, but was never quite sure how he would react when she asked him a personal question.

“You’re rather quiet,” she commented at last.

Vader glanced at her briefly. “Is that a problem?”

“Well, no,” she admitted. “I was just wondering what you were thinking about.”

“Nothing in particular,” he replied.

Padmé knew he was lying, but said nothing in response immediately. “You... you don’t like children?” she asked finally.

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you don’t want children,” she reminded him.

Vader hesitated for a moment before replying. “Does that matter?”

Padmé frowned. “Well, yes,” she replied. “I do.”

Vader wasn’t quite sure how to tell her that the possibility of having children together was nonexistent. “You do realize that in order to have children together we must have sexual relations,” he told her.

Padmé’s face reddened slightly at his statement. “Well, of course I realize that,” she said at last. “We’ll be married, after all. Isn’t that part of being married?”

Vader nodded. “So I understand,” he replied.

Padmé felt as though she was getting mixed messages from him. Was he trying to shock her? Surely he didn’t think this would do it; she wasn’t a fool, after all.

“Have you contacted your parents yet?” he asked, changing the subject.

“No,” she replied. “I had planned on doing that today, but you had other plans.”

“Perhaps you ought to do that soon,” he told her. “You’re running out of time.”

Padmé nodded, his words carrying more weight than he realized.

Upon arriving back at the apartment, Padmé and Vader saw that his belongings had been delivered.

"Is this all?" she asked, looking at the small collection of bags that sat on the floor.

"Yes," he replied, picking up two of them. "I'll put them away. Contact your parents."

Padmé nodded as she watched him carry two large suitcases out of the foyer. Realizing that she had no time to lose, she walked over to the comm. and sat down at the screen. Bracing herself for what was bound to be a very difficult conversation, she keyed in the code to her parents' home on Naboo. After a few moments, her father's face appeared on the screen.

"Padmé, what the devil is going on?" Ruwee asked without preamble.

Padmé sighed. "It's a long story, Dad," she told him.

"What is this nonsense we've been hearing about you marrying Darth Vader??" Ruwee demanded. "Tell me it's not true!"

Padmé lowered her eyes. "It is true, Dad," she told him. "Is Mom there? I'll explain everything."

Ruwee looked away for a moment and then back at Padmé. "She's coming," he told her. "What happened, Padmé?" he asked. "What about Palo?"

Padmé waited for her mother to join her father before continuing.

"Padmé, what is going on?" Jobal asked. "Your sister is here, and we were just trying to imagine what could have happened to make you break your engagement with Palo. What happened??"

"Palo was having an affair with my assistant," Padmé began, deciding not to tell them the whole ugly truth. "I found out only recently, but not before he nearly raped me in my own office."

"What!?" Jobal cried. "I can't believe what I'm hearing!"

"It's true," Padmé said. "He was drunk, and was very belligerent. If it weren't for Darth Vader arriving when he had, Palo would have succeeded in raping me."

Padmé's parents were silent for a moment as they digested this startling news.

"Did Vader kill the bastard?" Ruwee asked at last. "I would have if I'd been there."

"No, he didn't," Padmé replied. "Only because I stopped him."

"Is that why you're marrying him, Padmé?" Jobal asked, trying to make sense out of it all. "Out of a sense of gratitude?"

Padmé smiled. "Well, I suppose it started out that way," she replied. "What can I say? He swept me off my feet."

Ruwee and Jobal looked at one another in shock. They had always known the younger of their two daughters to be level headed and sensible, never impulsive. It seemed highly unlikely that any man could sweep her off of her feet.

"The wedding is in three days," she told them. "And I really hope you'll come. Sola and her family as well."

“Of course we’ll come,” Jobal said. ‘I just hope you know what you’re doing, Padmé,’ she felt compelled to add. “This is so unlike you, this impulsiveness.”

Padmé smiled. “I know it is,” she said, keeping up the appearance of a blushing bride to be. “But trust me, okay? I know what I’m doing.”

“You’re not giving us much of a choice, Padmé,” Ruwee pointed out. “But we’ll support you, no matter. You know that.”

“Thank you,” Padmé replied, immensely grateful for her parents’ support. “This means so much to me. Will you extend my invitation to Sola as well?”

“Of course,” Jobal replied. “We’ll make the arrangements for the trip as soon as possible. Are you prepared? Is everything ready?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, we’ve hired wedding planners,” she told them. “Everything is taken care of.”

“Is your young man there?” Ruwee asked. “I’d like to meet him.”

Padmé felt a wave of anxiety wash over her. “Yes, he is here as a matter of fact,” she said. “He’s been moving his things in today,” she added. She looked over his shoulder, startled to see Vader sitting on one of the sofas, listening intently to the whole conversation. She motioned for him to come closer.

Vader stood up and walked over to the comm. and looked at the screen where Padmé’s parents were waiting.

“Mom, Dad, this is Darth Vader,” Padmé said.

“Mr. and Mrs. Naberrie,” Vader said, nodding his head to them respectfully.

“We want to thank you for saving Padmé from that son of a bitch Palo Corrino,” Ruwee said. “She told us how you intervened.”

“I was fortunate enough to be at the right place at the right time,” Vader told them, glancing at Padmé. “Although he deserved far more punishment than he received.”

“I’d have castrated the bastard,” Ruwee commented.

Vader smiled. “Yes, your daughter said as much,” he replied. “I offered to do it, but she declined.”

Jobal and Ruwee smiled, deciding that they liked their soon to be son-in-law. He was not at all what they expected after seeing him on the holonet. Obviously Padmé saw something in him or else she would not be marrying him.

“So we’ll see you in a couple of days then?” Padmé asked.

“Yes, we’ll do our best to arrive the day before the wedding,” Jobal said.

“That’s wonderful,” Padmé replied with a smile. “I can’t wait to see you both.”

Vader walked away to let Padmé say goodbye to her parents. She was clearly very close to them, which didn’t really surprise him. He waited for her to end the transmission and join him before questioning her.

“Why did you lie to your parents?” he asked her as she sat down across from him.

“I didn’t lie, not entirely,” she replied.

“Yes you did,” he countered. ‘You told them you were marrying me out of gratitude,’ he reminded her. “That I’d... what did you say? Swept you off your feet? Lies, both of them.”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “But the truth would only upset them. I didn’t want to do that to them. It was hard enough telling them about what Palo did; I didn’t have the heart to tell them the real circumstances of our engagement.”

Vader nodded. “I see,” he commented simply.

“I’m sure you must think I’m foolish and weak for caring about their feelings,” she said, “but I love my parents. I don’t want to hurt them unnecessarily. And I would appreciate it if you wouldn’t tell them the true reasons behind our marriage.”

“As you wish,” he replied simply. “But surely you must realize that Corrino will undoubtedly tell them his version of what happened,” he pointed out.

Padmé nodded. “I’m sure,” she replied. “But you heard my father. Palo will be lucky if he doesn’t seek him out and have a go at him.”

“With a butter knife?” Vader asked. “Or was it a spoon?”

Padmé smiled. “Either would do the job,” she said. She sighed. “I’m worn out, and it’s Dormé’s night off.”

“So?”

“So that means I have to make dinner,” she said, standing up. “I hate cooking.”

Vader looked up at her. “That’s unfortunate,” he countered. “I like eating.”

Padmé looked at him. “I don’t suppose *you* know how to cook?” she asked.

“I can manage,” he told her.

“Oh yes? Prove it,” she said.

“You want me to cook?” he asked, his surprise evident.

“Well, help at least,” she said. “A collaborative effort.”

Vader stood up. “If you insist,” he agreed at last. “Lead the way.”

“No, not like that, it has to be finer.”

“You didn’t specify.”

“I thought you said you could cook!”

“I did, but cooking doesn’t usually entail this much nit picking.”

Padmé put one hand on her hip and gave him a withering look. “Just chop,” she said.

Vader sighed and proceeded to chop. “Isn’t this what droids are for?” he muttered.

Padmé made no reply, but when she turned her back to him, she couldn't help but smile.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

The Great Western Sea was the only body of water left visible on Coruscant, not far from the Manarai Mountains. Although it was an artificial reservoir, it was still a tranquil spot on the often chaotically busy planet, and attracted many tourists and natives alike, who vacationed on the many man made islands that floated on the lake's surface. Izabal was one such island, and was the location for what was being touted as the wedding of the season.

A congregation of perhaps one hundred had gathered and had begun to take their seats on the chairs that had been set up in one of the islands large gardens. It was a sunny day, and the breeze coming from the sea was pleasant and carried the fragrance of dozens of flowers.

Darth Vader stood near the ornate archway that had been erected for the ceremony, his hands clasped behind his back. To anyone who looked at him, he was the picture of calmness, his face not giving away the nervous tension that grew as the minutes passed by. He looked around at the congregation as one by one they took their seats, recognizing only a handful of them. Most of the guest list had been put together by Palpatine, who was using the occasion as a means of ingratiating himself further to the political elite of the Republic. Vader saw him standing nearby talking with Mace Windu.

"All set, Lord Vader?" the clergyman said as he took his place.

Vader looked at him and nodded. It seemed that the big event was about to begin.

The garden was part of a large property that was comprised of several small buildings, lodgings for the visiting tourists who came here to enjoy the scenic splendor of the area. It was in one of these inns that Padmé was standing with her mother, who was putting the finishing touches on Padmé's hair.

"You look so beautiful," Dormé told her as she looked into the mirror.

Padmé smiled nervously. "Thanks," she said as Dormé handed Jobal another clip.

Jobal could see how jittery her daughter was and smiled, putting a hand on her shoulder. "It's natural to be nervous about your wedding, Padmé," she told her. "Especially the wedding night," she added.

"Mom, please," Padmé said, her face turning red.

"I know you're worried about that," Jobal continued, ignoring Padmé's protests. "I was too. But don't be worried, love. If this man loves you he will understand that you're inexperienced and act accordingly. It's a beautiful thing that a man and woman share. Don't be worried."

Padmé sighed. *But he doesn't love me, Mom, that's the problem*, she thought, her anxiety growing. "I'll try," she said at last as Jobal stepped back to admire her handiwork.

"I think that does it," Jobal said, handing the last few clips to Dormé. "We'd better get outside; you don't want to keep the poor man waiting."

Padmé nodded and took a deep breath as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. "Let's go," she said, screwing up her courage.

A chord of music sounded, and the congregation rose to their feet. Vader watched along with them as the small procession started its way to the makeshift altar. He couldn't help but smile when he saw his bride, and simply watched her as she approached him.

Padmé wore a gown of ivory silk, edged with lace. It brushed along the grass as she walked the lacy veil she wore attached to a simple headpiece fluttered ever so slightly in the breeze. In her hands she carried a simple nosegay of flowers her mother had brought her from Naboo. They were said to be good luck. Jobal had no idea how much her daughter needed that in large doses as she prepared to marry the infamous Darth Vader.

Padmé was surprised to see Vader smiling at her, and figured he was doing so to put on a good show for all their guests. He wore, as usual, a black tunic and trousers, with tall black boots. She had begun to wonder if he ever wore any other color, and yet, had to admit, that it suited him well.

Padmé stepped up to him, as the music stopped. The cleric turned to them and began the rite of marriage. For Padmé it was like being in a dream, the surroundings, the circumstances, everything seeming strangely unreal, and she herself felt oddly detached from everything. She heard herself saying the words, heard Vader saying his own part. She felt Vader slip the ring on her finger, and the cleric join their hands together.

"You may kiss your bride," the cleric said, bringing Padmé back at once. She wondered how Vader would respond. Vader bent to her and kissed her briefly on the cheek. The congregation applauded as the newlyweds turned to face them. Vader's eyes went to Palpatine, who was applauding with the rest, a smile on his face.

"Shall we, Senator?" Vader asked, offering Padmé his arm.

Is he going to call me Senator for the rest of my life? she thought as she linked her arm through his.

Guests mingled about and approached the newly married couple to congratulate them. Serving droids walked around serving drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

"Congratulations, Padmé," Sola said as she embraced her sister.

"Thank you Sola," Padmé replied. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"How could I miss my baby sister's wedding?" Sola said with a smile. She looked over at Vader who was shaking hands with some of the Jedi who were present. "Do you love him, Padmé?" she asked quietly. "Really?"

Padmé smiled her best diplomatic smile. "Would I have married him otherwise?" she asked.

Sola wasn't quite certain what to think of Padmé's answer. She had always suspected that Padmé did not love Palo; there had always been friendship between them, but no chemistry.

Did that exist between her and Vader? Sola hadn't seen them together enough to tell, but decided to keep an eye on the couple over the course of the afternoon.

Padmé found the afternoon to be exhausting. She had slept very little the previous night, and it was starting to catch up with her. But what was most challenging was keeping up the appearance of being happy. She knew she had to play to part of the blushing bride, but found it hard to summon up the enthusiasm needed to pull it off. What was more, she was preoccupied with thoughts of that night. Vader had made no secret of his indifference where Padmé was concerned; it seemed he had no feelings for her one way or the other. But that didn't mean he wouldn't be interested in sexual relations with her. He was a young man after all. And now that they were married, Padmé couldn't refuse him as easily as she had Palo.

After a sumptuous lunch, guests were invited to dance on the patio adjacent to the tables.

"I suppose we ought to be the first," Vader said, as though the thought of dancing with his new wife was immensely painful to him.

"That's usually the way," Padmé replied.

Vader stood up and pulled out her chair for her. "In that case, may I have this dance, Senator?"

Padmé stood and they walked over to the patio. "You know, I do have a name," she told him as they reached the center of the dance floor.

Vader looked down at her as he wrapped one arm around her waist. "I know you do," he said. "Force of habit I suppose."

"Well now that we're married, perhaps it's time to break that habit," she replied as they started their dance.

"As you wish," he replied. "Amidala."

Padmé found it strange to be called by that name, and realized that by using this he was maintaining a degree of formality with her, even though they were married now. Somehow that didn't surprise her.

"Will I ever learn your real name?" she asked him. "I know Darth Vader isn't it."

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"Just a feeling," she replied. "Am I right?"

Vader looked away from her for a moment. The name he'd been given when he was born was not one he'd been permitted to utter in fifteen years. It was the name of a person who no longer existed. "Yes," he told her at last.

"So what is it then?" she asked. "Your real name?"

He looked down at her again. "You ask far too many questions, has anyone ever told you that?" he replied.

Padmé frowned. "And you avoid just as many," she countered. "I'm your wife now, remember? Don't you think you can trust me?"

"It isn't a matter of trust, Amidala," he replied. He said no more, but Padmé sensed that there was a great deal more to his reticence than mere stubbornness. The more she got to know him, the more she realized that there was a great deal to this man she now called her husband. She only hoped that in time he would show her who he truly was.

Before it hardly seemed possible, the wedding festivities had started to wind down. Guests paid their respects to the newlyweds before departing, either to nearby accommodations or to a transport that would return them to the city. Padmé's parents were the last to say goodbye.

"Have a wonderful honeymoon," Jobal said as she hugged her daughter tightly. "And please come and visit soon."

"I will, I mean we will," Padmé replied, almost forgetting that she was a couple now.

"Take good care of our little girl," Ruwee said as he shook Vader's hand.

"You have my word that she will be well cared for," Vader replied.

Ruwee nodded, and then hugged Padmé goodbye.

"Well, looks like the party's over," Padmé said as she and Vader stood alone.

He nodded. "Do you want to leave tonight? Or wait until morning?" he asked. "We have a room reserved here if you're too tired to travel."

Surprised by his consideration, Padmé thought for a moment. The thought of a good night's sleep appealed to her tremendously. She realized that she could not put off the inevitable forever, after all. "I am," she said. "Very tired actually," she added, hoping he'd get the hint.

"Then we'll stay here tonight," he said. "Let's go find our room."

The suite that the wedding planners had booked for Vader and Padmé was large and luxurious. Every amenity imaginable was present, including a picturesque view of the sea from the large front window. It did, however, have only one bed. It was a large bed, but clearly they would have to sleep together in it.

"Nice room," Vader said as they stepped into the spacious anteroom.

"Yes," Padmé replied. The tension between them was palpable, for neither quite knew what to expect from the other.

"Well, I guess we should get ready for bed," Padmé said at last, feeling terribly awkward.

"I guess so," he replied. "Go ahead. Do you want a glass of wine?"

"Yes please," she asked. *I'm going to need it...*

Vader proceeded to open a bottle of wine while Padmé went into the bedroom to change out of her wedding gown. He was glad of the few minutes apart, for he was every bit as apprehensive about their wedding night as she obviously was. Up until now, he had managed to appear very cool and detached when it came to their impending marriage. But now that it was a reality, now that they were here, alone, on their wedding night, the reality of what had just happened was impossible to ignore. He was counting on Padmé's dislike of him to enable him to avoid any physical intimacy. Vader wasn't prepared to explain to her why physical

intimacy would not happen between them; he didn't want to appear weak in her eyes, he didn't want her to know that he was a virtual slave to his master, Palpatine.

Besides, it wasn't like he'd even been tempted to disobey his master's orders. Until now Senator Amidala had been annoying, nosey and judgmental. No, he didn't want any part of a physical relationship with her, not now, not ever. Vader felt secure in the strength of his resolve, the mastery of what Palpatine considered basic instincts.

"It's nice to be out of that gown."

Vader turned as Padmé entered the room once more. He looked at her for a moment and then took a long drink of the glass of wine he'd just poured.

Padmé wore a two piece negligee of white silk. The robe was partially open, the lacy gown underneath clung to the curves of her body in a way that made Vader take another drink of wine. He wasn't prepared for this; for the way looking at her made him feel.

"Everything alright?" she asked, pulling the robe closed. He was staring at her in a way that made her feel very uneasy. She couldn't tell if he was attracted to her or repulsed by her, and that made her feel even worse.

"Yes," he said, turning back to pour another glass of wine. He walked over to one of the large sofas and sat down, holding the glass out to her. She came and sat down with him, taking the wine. For a few moments they simply sat in silence, drinking their wine, the tension between them almost unbearable.

"Everything was lovely," she said at last, unable to stand another minute of silence. "The planners really out did themselves, don't you think?"

"Yes, they did an excellent job," Vader agreed. "And on short notice too."

Padmé nodded in agreement. "I will have to send them a message to thank them again," she said.

"Good idea."

More silence as they finished their wine. Neither one quite knew how to bring up the topic that was foremost on their minds, neither one wanted to admit that they had never been so uncomfortable. And yet, the bedroom doors stood open, the large bed was visible from where they sat, almost taunting them.

Padmé stifled a yawn, not too successfully, and Vader was grateful for it. "Tired?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered immediately. "I didn't sleep much last night," she added.

Vader nodded. "Well, then perhaps you'd like to get to bed," he said. "I mean, to sleep. I... I don't want you to feel obligated to...that is... if you'd rather we not... we're not..."

"Thank you," she said, putting him out of his misery. "I am rather tired."

"So am I," he said. "Perhaps we ought to just get a good night's sleep and not concern ourselves with... that."

Padmé smiled. She was delighted to see him less than composed and quite obviously nervous. It was the proof that she wanted that he was human after all.

“I’m going to get changed,” he said, setting his glass of wine down on the table before them. He stood up and left the room, disappearing into the ensuite beside the bedroom.

Padmé let out a long breath once he’d left the room, relieved beyond measure that he wasn’t anxious to consummate their marriage that night. She stood up and walked into the bedroom. The bed was huge, which meant she could probably pass the entire night in it without even knowing he was there. *Let’s hope so, anyway*, she thought as she pulled back the covers on one side. Removing the robe she laid it on the chair beside the bed and climbed under the covers, pulling them up, ensuring she was completely covered. She closed her eyes and did her utmost to relax, realizing that this is how she would be spending every night from now on.

Vader stood in the fresher, frustrated with indecision. He normally slept in the nude; but felt that under the circumstances that might not be the best course of action. He did not own a pair of pajamas, however; and refused to sleep in his clothes. Vader ran his hands through his hair in frustration. He was tired, and just wanted to sleep without having to worry about freaking out the woman he’d just married. So he decided to compromise. He stripped to his shorts. Looking in the mirror he decided that this was acceptable, and left the fresher to go join his new bride in bed.

The room was dark when he entered. He could make out the shape of Padmé’s still form on the far side of the bed. If she wasn’t asleep, she was making a very good impression of it. Vader climbed into the bed on the other side, noticing, to his dismay that she had pulled the quilt over to her side, leaving very little for him. He had two choices; pull it back, go cold, or venture into No Man’s Land, the center of the bed. He hated being cold, always had. Having her asleep made things considerably easier. And so he chose the third option. He moved to the center of the bed, making sure he kept his body as far from hers as possible. Grabbing the extra pillow from his side of the bed, he wrapped his arms around it, as he did every night and very soon fell asleep.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Vader passed a restive night. He was unaccustomed to sharing a bed with someone, and was unable to totally relax. In addition, he felt constricted and uncomfortable wearing shorts when he normally wore nothing. Rolling onto his back, he tried to calculate what time it was. Looking out the bedroom doors, he could see no hint of daylight filtering through the drawn curtains. He sighed, closed his eyes and did his best to relax. But then Padmé rolled over and he found himself ensnared by one slender, bare arm. Padmé was obviously a rather sound sleeper, and didn't seem to notice that she was now dangerously close to snuggling with her new husband. Vader wasn't sure what to do; if he moved he risked her waking up. But the longer she remained there, the more tense he became. Padmé sighed in her sleep and drew her body closer, unconsciously seeking the warmth of his body.

Vader opened his eyes, the situation more difficult than he'd imagined. Using the Force, he slowly lifted her arm from him and returned it to her side. And then he moved over, virtually giving her the bed, while he remained on the edge. He frowned, now fully awake, cold and strangely agitated. Was this what he had to look forward to every night? Had this been a terrible mistake? Deciding that he'd get no sleep under the present circumstances, Vader got up off the bed and walked into the anteroom. Activating one of the lights, he found his cloak and put it on, and then lay on one of the large couches. The light switched off after a moment or two, and Vader closed his eyes, doing his best to fall asleep on the couch that was not quite long enough for his large frame.

Jobal had just left the room and Padmé took a moment to look at her reflection one last time before heading outside. This was not at all how she had imagined her wedding day would be; she thought that it would be Palo who she was marrying, on Naboo, and that she would be excited and happy. But she wasn't on Naboo, she wasn't marrying Palo, and she was far from happy. The man she was about to marry was little more than a stranger to her, a sullen, dark stranger who drove her crazy sometimes with his mood swings, his sarcasm and his pig-headed stubbornness. And yet, there had been moments over the past week when she'd caught glimpses of a different man, a kinder, gentler man. But those glimpses were so brief and so infrequent that they left her wondering if it were merely her imagination or perhaps wishful thinking.

The door to the small dressing room opened, and Padmé looked over, expecting to see Sola or her mother come to fetch her. She wasn't prepared for who it was who appeared.

"Palo!" she cried. "What are you doing here??"

Palo smiled. He looked just as he had the last time she'd seen him, and seemed every bit as angry. "I just wanted to wish you well on your big day," he told her as he walked towards her. "You look beautiful," he told her.

"Thank you," she said, taking a step back. 'You shouldn't be here,' she said. "If Vader finds you here he will kill you. I won't be able to stop him this time."

"He doesn't scare me," he retorted. 'Besides, death would be welcome after the hell you're putting me through. Do you have any idea how it makes me feel to know that you're marrying someone else, Padmé? To know that you'll share his bed? Have his children?'

"We've been through this, Palo," Padmé replied, trying to remain calm. "Please don't make me repeat myself."

"I don't care if we've been through it," he snapped. "I have to live with this for the rest of my life, damn it! Don't you get it? You've ruined my life! You've ripped out my heart! And now you just expect me to accept it and move on? Well I can't do that, Padmé, not without making you pay first," he said, pulling a blaster out of his jacket...

Vader had just fallen into a deep sleep when it was shattered by a scream. He sat up at once, discombobulated for a moment, and then remembered where he was and who it was who had screamed. Jumping off the couch he ran into the bedroom where Padmé was in the throes of a nightmare. The lights went on as he sat down on the side of the bed, and reached out to take her by the shoulders. She moved away, though, as though in her dream she was trying to get away from someone.

"Please don't!" she cried in her sleep. "Palo, don't hurt me! Don't!"

Vader frowned as he realized what she was dreaming about, and tried again, this time grabbing her by the shoulders and lifting her from the bed.

"Wake up, Amidala," he said in an authoritative tone. "You're having a nightmare. Wake up!"

Padmé's eyes finally opened and she looked around for a moment, her eyes wide with fear. When she saw that she was not in danger, that it was not Palo she threw her arms around Vader's neck, trembling with fear.

Vader didn't know what to do. Clearly the dream had terrified her; clearly she was far from over the incident where Palo had so nearly raped her. Despite her strong façade, she had obviously been very traumatized by the incident.

"It was a dream," he told her. "You're safe, there's no reason to be afraid."

Padmé pulled back and looked at him, startled that he was so close.

"Sorry," she said, removing her arms at once. "I was dreaming about Palo."

Vader nodded. "I know," he told her. "He was attacking you."

"Yes," she said quietly. "He had a blaster, he was forcing me to..." she stopped as the images came back to her. She closed her eyes and fought for control against the terror that washed over her.

"I promise you that he will never hurt you," Vader said. "I told him that if he came within a thousand meters of you I would burst every organ in his body."

Padmé opened her eyes. "Sounds painful," she said softly, knowing that in his own awkward way he was trying to comfort her.

Vader nodded. "Oh I'd make sure of it," he assured her.

Padmé smiled a little, and wiped the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand. “Thank you,” she said.

“Well, you were yelling in your sleep,” he told her. “Rather hard to sleep when that’s going on,” he added with the slightest hint of a smile.

Padmé nodded. “Sorry,” she replied. She noticed that he was wearing his cloak. “Why are you wearing this?” she asked.

“I was cold,” he told her, standing up from the bed. “You, my dear wife, are a blanket hog.”

Padmé looked up at him. “I am not!”

Vader removed the cloak and threw it on the back of the chair where her robe was. “Yes you are,” he told her as he walked around to the other side of the bed.

Padmé watched him as he walked around to the other side of the bed. She had never seen him in any state of undress before, and simply stared at the sheer power and masculine beauty of his body. There were several rather noticeable scars on his back, however, and she frowned when she saw them.

“Look at the quilt,” he challenged her as he got into bed once more. “It’s all bunched up on your side of the bed.”

Padmé looked down and realized that he was right. “I’m not used to sleeping with anyone,” she told him. ‘I guess that will take some getting used to,’ she added. “Sorry.”

“I suppose we have an adjustment period to look forward to,” he said as he lay back on the bed. “I only hope I don’t die of hypothermia before it’s over.”

Padmé didn’t say anything, but fired a pillow directly at his face and rolled over onto her side with her back to him. Vader removed the pillow, a smile on his face.

It was quite late the next morning when Padmé awoke. She opened her eyes and saw that Vader was still asleep. He was lying facing her, his long, muscular arms wrapped around a pillow. She studied his face for a moment. There was no denying that he was an uncommonly handsome man. His long, wavy hair fell into his eyes as he slept, but not enough to hide the long eye lashes that edged them. His expression was peaceful as he slept, more peaceful than she’d ever seen it when he was awake. Was it possible that she could learn to love this man? Would he ever care about her? Or was she kidding herself for even considering such a thing?

With a sigh, Padmé pulled back the covers and got out of bed. She walked into the fresher to have a shower, leaving Vader to sleep in peace.

Vader woke up to the sound of his comlink sounding in his cloak. He called it to his hand with the Force, yawning as he did so.

“Good morning Lord Vader, I hope I didn’t wake you.”

Vader was on the alert at once hearing his master’s voice. “No, no of course not,” he replied.

"I wanted to congratulate you once more on your marriage," Palpatine said in a tone that Vader recognized well. It was a mocking, sarcastic tone that spoke volumes of what Palpatine thought of the institution of marriage.

"Thank you," Vader replied.

"I trust the wedding night was...uneventful?" Palpatine asked.

Vader frowned, and he felt his entire body grow tense at his master's unspoken accusation. "I gave you my word," he said at last. "And I am a man of my word, Master."

"Yes, I know you are," Palpatine replied. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't swept away by the Senator's beauty. She is a remarkably beautiful woman, you must admit."

An image of Padmé in her negligee popped into Vader's mind, which he'd had the foresight to shield from Palpatine's perusal. "She is. But her beauty has no affect on me, I assure you."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Palpatine replied. "Enjoy your honeymoon, Lord Vader."

The transmission ended, and Vader had to fight not to crush the communication device in his hand.

"Who were you talking to?"

Vader turned around to see Padmé standing in the room. She wore a hotel robe and her hair was wrapped up in a towel.

"The Chancellor," Vader replied. "He wanted to wish us a good time on our honeymoon."

Padmé nodded, not quite convinced that was the only reason for Palpatine's communication. "Is that all?" she asked.

Vader nodded as he walked towards her. He didn't want to take his mood out on her, but Palpatine had made him so irritated that he was having a difficult time keeping a lid on his anger.

Padmé watched him as he tossed the comlink onto the dresser. "Why don't I believe you?" she was unfortunate enough to ask.

Vader looked at her. "Probably because you don't trust me," he retorted. "You think you know everything but you don't, Senator," he added hotly. He walked into the fresher without another word, leaving Padmé standing there in a state of shock. *What was that??* she wondered. She looked at the comlink on the dresser, feeling certain that whatever Palpatine had said to Vader was the reason for his mood. There was more to Vader's association with the Chancellor than Padmé knew that much was certain. But it was just as certain that Vader wasn't about to illuminate his wife any time soon on that association, and so she could merely speculate. After this incident, however, she realized that such speculation was best kept to herself, and decided not to provoke Vader where Palpatine was concerned. She could only hope that in time he would trust her enough to tell her of his own volition. *And if that day never comes? What then?* She wondered as she set about to combing through her long wet hair. *Don't go there, Padmé, you'll only make yourself crazy, you'll only depress yourself.*

Vader braced his hands against the wall of the shower and let the water pelt down between his shoulder blades. His hands balled into fists as he thought of how his master questioned his loyalty. Was this a test? He wondered. Had Palpatine only agreed to this marriage as some sort of perverse test of Vader's strength of will? Did he secretly hope that Vader would fail in order to find justification in punishing him and eliminating the troublesome Senator Amidala? *Is he using me?* Vader wondered, knowing that with Palpatine anything was possible. There was no sense dwelling on it, he realized. He knew his place, and he knew what he risked by even questioning his master's orders. *You're a slave, don't ever forget that, nothing more, nothing less, and you owe your life entirely to me...* How many times had Palpatine told him that? How many beatings had he taken when he'd dared to question it? His body still bore the scars of those beatings, to say nothing of his mind.

Padmé had just slipped on a blouse and started buttoning it up when Vader emerged from the fresher. She looked up at him, testing the waters to determine if it was safe to speak to him again. His expression gave no hint of what was going on inside of him, however; something Padme was getting used to. They each dressed in silence, backs turned to the other as though trying to pretend the other wasn't present. Padmé fought against the wave of despair that threatened to overcome her. This was their honeymoon, their first day as a married couple, and yet they weren't even speaking to one another. Was this what she had to look forward to for the rest of her life?

"Breakfast, Senator?" Vader said at last as he sat on the edge of the bed pulling on his tall boots.

Padmé turned to him, her hands busy pinning up her long hair. "Sure," she said. "Just give me a minute."

"Forget to pack your gravity repulsor?" he teased.

Padmé looked at him in the mirror, relieved to see that the tempest had passed. "It wouldn't fit in my bag," she replied.

Vader smiled as he stood up. He came over and stood behind her, watching her as she finished. She then stood up and turned to him. "All set."

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

After spending an hour eating breakfast in virtual silence, Vader and Padmé set off for the planet Bellassa. Their destination there was the capital city of Ussa. Bellassa was located in the Outer Rim Territory, so the trip there took the better part of the day.

Padmé had been dreading the long journey, for having to spend such a long time alone with Vader was rather unnerving. She felt certain that most of the trip would be spent in tension filled silence, or else with the two of them bickering about something foolish. Padmé vowed not to provoke him unnecessarily; being in a small vessel for many hours was going to be brutal enough. The last thing she needed was his moodiness.

"Bellassa is a beautiful place," Padmé said as Vader made the jump into hyperspace. "I'm looking forward to seeing it again."

Vader nodded. "So I've heard," he replied. "I've never seen it myself."

"One of the perks of being a queen, I suppose," she told him. "Lots of opportunity to travel."

"No doubt," he replied. "I've had very little opportunity to travel myself."

Padmé was surprised by his disclosure. He so seldom told her anything about himself, that she took this as a positive sign and decided to take a chance he'd be willing to open up to her more. "What is your home world?" she asked.

Vader hesitated, but only for a moment. She was his wife, after all. She was bound to be curious about him. "Tatooine," he told her at last.

"Really? I was there once about ten years ago," she said. "Where did you..."

"I left when I was four," he told her. "And I haven't been back since," he told her.

Padmé frowned. Four? Who leaves home when they're four?? "You said you had no family," she said cautiously. "Is that why you left? Did they... die?"

Vader was silent for a moment, her innate curiosity starting to annoy him. "In a manner of speaking, yes," he said. "My mother gave me up when I was four. I never had a father that I knew of."

"Oh, I'm...sorry," she said, not knowing how to respond to such a disclosure. *No wonder he reacted as he did when he asked about his family...* she thought.

Vader looked at her, sensing how uneasy she felt at his candor. "Don't pity me, Amidala," he told her. "I was better off without her considering what she did," he added, the bitterness clear in his tone.

"Is that the where the scars came from? From her?" Padmé asked.

Vader frowned. “Scars?” he asked.

“I saw them last night,” she told him. “Your back, your shoulders. Did she do that to you?”

Vader’s jaw tightened visibly, and Padmé began to think that she had gone too far.

“No,” he replied at last. “From what I can remember, she wasn’t physically abusive.”

His response only opened up a whole new series of questions in Padmé’s mind. Where did they come from, if not from her? And where did he go when he was four? Who raised him? Were they responsible for the abuse, which, she suspected, was far more than physical. She looked at him, sensing that this was as far as she dare push at this point. He had surprised her with just how much he had told her, and what he had told her gave her some insight into who he was. Padmé had grown up in a loving family, with two parents who doted on her and encouraged her. The thought of a mother giving up her child at any age, let alone the tender age of four, was utterly shocking to her. Was it any wonder that Vader was that way he was? And yet, it made her wonder what sort of environment he was raised in. Had the Chancellor done this? Was Palpatine the one who had turned him into the man he had become? She thought back to how Vader’s mood had darkened upon hearing from the Chancellor earlier that day...

Padmé looked over at Vader, who was engaged in checking the navi computer. *No, don’t push him*, she thought to herself. As much as she wanted to ask, as much as she needed to know more, she had come to realize that getting to know her husband would be a challenge unlike any she’d ever known.

The city of Ussa was built as a series of circular districts, around seven lakes, with wide concentric boulevards and divided into districts, some of which were named for the local lakes. The *Eclipse* was the premier hotel in Ussa, known for its luxury and beautiful views of the nearby lakes. It was close to evening by the time Vader and Padmé arrived at the concierge’s desk. After checking in, a bellhop showed them up to their suite.

The lift had only raised two floors when it stopped, and a rather large group of guests stepped inside. Padmé and Vader were jostled to the back of the lift, which made both of them more than a little uncomfortable.

Vader frowned, fighting the urge to shove the other hotel patrons against the wall. He thought better of it, however, and simply looked down at Padmé. She looked as annoyed as he felt. He shook his head, and then looked around at the others. When his eyes lit on one man, he smiled.

“Watch this,” he told Padmé in a low voice.

Padmé looked up at him. “What?”

Vader nodded his head in the direction of the man he had in his sights, a man who was wearing a rather obvious hair piece. Without even lifting a finger, Vader made the hair piece slide forward into the man’s eyes. The man, who was engaged in conversation with the others in his party, hastily pushed it back, trying his best to act casually about the whole thing. No sooner had he removed his hand from it when the hair piece slid forward again, almost hitting his nose this time before he was able to stop its descent.

Padmé couldn't watch any more and looked up at her husband. "That's not funny," she said with a smile.

Vader smiled in return. "So why are you laughing?" he asked.

"I'm not," she replied.

Vader took this as a challenge and redoubled his efforts. "What about now?" he asked. Reluctantly, Padmé turned back to the group. This time the toupee slowly rose from the man's head and hovered in midair. The man had no idea what was happening, which made the situation even more ridiculous.

Padmé had to cover her mouth with her hand to hide her laughter and turned back to Vader just as the door opened. She squeezed her way to the front, Vader close behind. As the door closed, Padmé burst into laughter.

"That was very cruel," she said through her laughter.

Vader merely smiled as they followed the bellhop down the corridor to their suite.

"Here we are," the man announced as he keyed in the security code for the honeymoon suite. He walked in with their bags, and was followed by Vader and Padmé who stood in the doorway for a moment simply staring at the opulent room.

An enormous picture window ran along one side of the front room, affording a spectacular view of the nearby lake. The common area was warmed by a large and roaring fireplace, rug-accented hardwood floors and luxurious, tastefully arranged sofas and chairs. The room virtually dripped in romance, as both Vader and Padmé were uncomfortable to notice.

"And if you'll follow me you can see the bedroom," the man was saying, carrying their bags towards a set of double doors. The doors opened to reveal an enormous four poster bed.

"The ensuite features a large Jacuzzi," the bellhop continued. "Plenty of room for two," he added with a smile.

Padmé and Vader stood in silence as they took in all the amenities of the luxurious room, noting the complimentary bottle of chilled champagne beside the hot tub, the fresh flowers beside the bed and the basket of fresh fruit in the front room. It was perfect, or at least it would have been, had the newlyweds had actually come here to celebrate their marriage.

"I hope you enjoy your stay with us," the man said with another smile and then left them.

"Well, this is quite the place," Padmé said at last.

Vader nodded. "I've never seen anything like it," he remarked, walking over to the huge hot tub. "What is the purpose of this?" he asked.

Padmé walked over to stand beside him. "It's to relax in," she said. "Haven't you ever been in a hot tub?"

"No," he replied. "I imagine it must require a great deal of water," he commented.

Padmé couldn't help but smile. "Want to give it a try? I think you'll enjoy it. It's very relaxing."

"If you wish," he replied. "Uh....what do you wear? Or is clothing optional?" he asked with a hint of a smile.

Padmé could see that he was trying to unnerve her, and she wasn't about to let him. "Optional," she told him, and then walked into the bedroom to get changed.

Vader frowned, not expecting her to respond as she had. *She won't do it*, he told himself with certainty. *She's got a bathing suit in her suitcase, I'm sure of it*. He did not, however; but the idea of a good hot soak was very appealing. It had been a long trip from Coruscant and his back felt stiff and sore. Taking off his cloak, he let it drop to the floor as he bent to turn on the water. The amount of water it would take to fill the tub was more than a Tatooine family would use in a year, he realized. A tiny part of him felt guilty at what he considered wastefulness. Would Palpatine approve of such opulence? Such decadence? Such...

"Decided to join me?"

Vader looked up to see his wife wearing a robe under which, he assumed, was a bathing suit. Part of him was relieved that she'd gone with the clothing option. Part of him was disappointed that she had.

"I don't have a bathing suit," he told her simply.

Padmé swallowed. "Okay," she said after a moment. "We are married now," she added with a nervous smile.

"Yes, so we are," he replied. "But you're wearing one, so I figured..." he stopped as she untied her robe and took it off. She wore nothing under it.

"What were you saying?" she asked as she stepped up and into the tub which was nearly full.

Vader had forgotten completely what he was saying and simply stood there for a few moments trying to regain his senses. *I did not see that coming*, he thought, dismayed by her ability to shock him senseless.

"I said you're right," he said at last, finding his voice. "We are married. I'll be right back."

Padmé watched him as he retreated into the bedroom, smiling to herself. *You think you hold all the cards, Lord Vader*, she mused as she relaxed into the tub; *you haven't seen my hand yet...*

Vader sat on the edge of the bed, kicking off his boots. The image of his wife's naked body was burned in his mind, and he felt helpless to push it away. Truth be told, he didn't want to push it away. He had never seen a woman's body, not live, in the flesh. Seeing Padmé's made him realize why Palpatine had kept him away from women since he'd become an adult. Seeing her body had done things to his own, strange, powerful things that he felt he had no control over. He felt betrayed by his body, betrayed by its reaction to hers, a reaction that he felt he had to master but was at a loss to know how. No teachings he'd ever received served him at this point, when the hunger he felt was unlike anything he'd ever felt. And then he remembered his master's words of warning. Palpatine was not one to make idle threats; he'd threatened to kill Padmé and make his own life a living hell if there was any physical relationship between him and his wife. At the time it had seemed easy to assure Palpatine that there would be none. Vader remembered even saying that he didn't want her. Had Palpatine

any idea of what he was asking? Had he ever been in the position that Vader now found himself in? No, not likely. It hardly seemed possible for someone like Palpatine, someone so devoid of humanity to feel the things that Vader felt at that moment.

“Are you coming in?”

Vader looked up as he heard Padmé call him from the next room.

“Yes,” he said, standing up at last. He pulled off the remainder of his clothing, realizing it was pointless to stall any longer.

Padmé took a sip of the champagne she’d poured and closed her eyes, relaxing as the bubbles started up. It was so peaceful here that she’d almost forgotten the circumstances in which she found herself here. But then she heard water moving up against the side of the tub, and opened her eyes. Vader was sitting across from her in the tub.

“Well? What do you think?” she asked.

Think? I don’t think I can at the moment, he reflected. “Very nice,” he replied.

“Would you like some champagne?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he replied, and then watched as she moved over to pick up the glass on the side of the tub. He watched as she moved out of the water, as rivulets of water ran down over her bare skin, and dripped from the chignon her hair was tied in. She moved over to hand the glass to him, noting the way he was looking at her. She smiled. “I don’t know if it’s from Naboo, but it’s very good,” she told him as he took the glass from her.

“Thank you,” he said as she moved back to her side of the tub. He took a rather large sip of the champagne. “Excellent,” he said.

Padmé nodded in agreement as she picked up her glass and took another sip. She then closed her eyes and relaxed her head back against the padded edge of the tub.

Vader watched her, unable to tear his eyes from her. He felt as though his body was waging war against his mind, and his body was winning the fight. And this was only the first day of the honeymoon. There were seven more days after this one, not to mention seven more nights in her bed...

“You’re very beautiful, Amidala,” he said at last. “I don’t know if I’ve ever told you that before.”

Padmé opened her eyes and looked at him in surprise. “You haven’t,” she said. “But thank you for doing so now.”

“No problem,” he replied. He found it becoming exceedingly difficult to put any sort of coherent sentence together as his body took total control from his brain. ‘I have to admit,’ he said, taking another sip of his champagne. “You surprised me earlier.”

“How did I do that?” she asked.

“Well, I didn’t think you’d be...nude...” he replied awkwardly. “In here,” he added.

“Does that make you uncomfortable?” she asked.

“No, I wouldn’t use that word,” he replied, taking another sip of the champagne.

Padmé did the same. “What word then?”

Vader furrowed his brow as he tried to put into words what he was feeling. “I don’t know that it can be summed up in one succinct word,” he said at last. “All I know is I’m certain I’ve never had feelings like this before.”

Padmé was surprised that he was being so forthcoming with her. Of course, the champagne didn’t hurt; neither did the fact that they were both naked. He was, after all, a man, and she would be blind not to see the affect she was having on him. It pleased her that he felt this way, for it made him seem less aloof, and made him more human than she’d ever seen him.

“Is that a good thing, you think?” she asked.

He thought for a moment, studying her face as he did so. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I’m confused.”

Padmé frowned. “Confused? What’s there to be confused about? You’re a man, I’m a woman. We find one another attractive. It’s the most natural thing in the universe.”

“You find me attractive?” he asked.

“Yes,” she told him. “Very much so.”

This only added to his confusion. He had virtually forced this woman to marry him, and had gone out of his way to be an arrogant jerk at every opportunity. How could she find him attractive?

Padmé didn’t understand Vader’s confusion. It was obvious that he was attracted to her, but at the same time he was very hesitant. Was it possible that he was as experienced as she was? Surely not, surely Darth Vader was not a virgin...

“This champagne is going to my head,” she said at last. “I think maybe we ought to have something to eat.”

Vader nodded, relieved to be released from the difficult conversation. “How about room service?” he suggested. “I don’t feel like going out.”

“Sound great,” she said. “There’s a comm. panel right over there,” she said, pointing to the far wall.

“They really did think of everything,” he said. “I can’t imagine how many conversations I’d want to have from in here, though,” he added as he stood up.

Padmé laughed and then watched him as he stood up and walked to the comm. She found herself staring at his body, his long, well muscled legs, his taut, muscular bottom, the broadness of his shoulders... she frowned when her eyes lit upon the scars on his back. *Who did that to you, Vader?* She wondered.

“What do you feel like?” Vader asked as he perused the menu on the screen.

“Surprise me,” she told him.

Vader glanced over at her, noting that she was quite clearly looking at his body. He looked back at the screen with a smile and ordered dinner for them both.

“Hope you’re hungry,” he said as he turned back to her. “I ordered a lot.”

Padmé nodded, doing her best to keep her eyes from straying over his body, to the part that she’d never seen on any man. Vader picked up a robe from the pile of linens and put it on, feeling uneasy all of a sudden under her scrutiny.

“I am hungry actually,” she said, standing up from the tub. “Would you hand me a towel please?”

Vader picked up a towel and walked over to her, his eyes roving over her body as he handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the towel and wrapping it around herself. Neither spoke for a moment, the tension rising up between them once more. But this time there was a new dimension to the awkwardness that had always been between them. Padmé had to wonder how long this would last before one gave in to the feelings that both were trying to deny.

Padmé walked over to pick up a robe when the door chime sounded.

“That was fast,” Vader said as he headed out to answer the door. He tightened the robe as he reached the door and opened it. It wasn’t room service; however, it was the bellhop returning with a large gift basket.

“This arrived for you and your wife, sir,” the bellhop explained.

“Thanks,” Vader said, taking the basket and letting the door close in the man’s face.

“What is that?”

Vader looked over to Padmé who now wore a robe identical to his.

“Looks like a bottle of wine and some other stuff,” he said, setting it down on a table and sitting on the couch before it. “There must be a card here somewhere,” he added, looking it over.

Padmé came and sat down beside him as he pulled a small white envelope from the basket. He opened it and read it briefly before handing it to her. “It’s from your parents,” he told her.

Padmé smiled. “That was very nice of them,” she said as he unwrapped the contents of the basket. “Is that blossom wine?” she asked.

Vader handed her the bottle. “What’s blossom wine?” he asked.

“It’s a traditional wine used for special occasions on Naboo,” she told him.

“I see,” Vader replied. “We’ll have it with dinner,” he added.

“Wine after champagne?” she asked. “That’s sort of... dangerous, don’t you think?” she asked.

“In what way?” Vader asked, interested to hear her explanation.

“Well,” she said, setting down the bottle on the table, “over indulging in alcohol on an empty stomach can be rather... irresponsible,” she replied.

Vader laughed. “Ever the proper lady, aren’t you?” he asked.

Padmé tilted her head to one side and looked at him. “Is that what you think?” she asked.

“Yes, pretty much,” he replied.

She smiled. “Well, I haven’t exactly had much occasion to be anything else,” she admitted. “I’m not sure I’d know how to be anything else,” she admitted.

Her honesty disarmed him, and he found himself, once again, at a loss for words. “I suppose I can relate in a way,” he told her. “When all one has in their life is duties and obligations, it’s hard to know how to act in less formal situations.”

“Well, I think we’re doing well,” she said. ‘We’re both in bath robes, we’ve both had two glasses of champagne,’ she added with a smile, “and we’ve both admitted that we find each other attractive.”

Vader leaned back against the couch, stretching his arms out along the back of it. “So you think there’s hope for us, then? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Hope?” she said. “Well, considering the circumstances under which we got married, I think we’re doing alright, don’t you? We’re not fighting; we’re actually having a civil conversation. I’d say that’s a good thing, wouldn’t you?”

Vader nodded, studying her face thoroughly. “Yes,” he agreed at last. “I have to admit though, I’m somewhat surprised that you are as positive as you are, considering, as you say, the circumstances under which we were married. I expected you to hate me for the rest of your life. You as much as told me you would.”

Padmé shrugged. “Life is what you make it,” she told him. ‘No, I’m not happy about how you insinuated yourself into my life and turned everything upside down,’ she continued. “But what is the sense of being miserable because of something you have no control over?”

Vader was surprised by her words. This was not at all what he expected when he married her. He had planned to punish her for being such a bleeding heart, to break her spirit; but now he was finding that spirit was far stronger than he’d given her credit for.

“Life isn’t always fair, Amidala,” he said at last. “Some are given more than others. You have lived a life of privilege and wanted for nothing your whole life. It’s natural that you would have a more positive outlook than those who haven’t enjoyed the sort of life you have.”

“I realize that,” she replied. She looked at him. “What happened to you? Where did those scars come from?”

Vader looked away. “Why do you want to know?” he asked quietly.

“Because you’re my husband,” she replied at once. “And I’m trying to get to know you, to understand you.”

“And you think that will give you some insight? Is that it?” he asked.

Padmé nodded.

He looked up at her, but before he could say anything, the door chime sounded. “Looks like it’s dinner time,” he said, standing up.

Padmé watched him as he headed for the door, wondering if he’d have answered her question had their dinner not arrived at that moment.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Neither Vader nor Padmé slept well that night. Despite the comfortable bed, despite the wine they had enjoyed before, during and after dinner, both found themselves to be very tense knowing that the other was lying in the same bed as they were.

Vader had decided that sleeping in the nude was acceptable, since she had already seen him naked now. But that didn't help him sleep. He felt agitated, restless and irritated all at once. He turned onto his side, facing Padmé, who was having as much trouble as he was falling asleep.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "You?"

"No."

"Dinner was good."

"It was. The wine your parents sent was very good too."

"Yes, I'm glad we were able to have some. It's sort of an old tradition on Naboo for newlyweds to have it on their wedding day."

"Well we were off by a day, does that still count?"

"I think so, yes."

"Good. Naboo seems to be a planet full of tradition. I like that."

Padmé smiled. "You do like tradition, I've noticed that. It surprised me at first actually."

"Why is that?"

"Because you seem so... aloof so much of the time," she replied. "I didn't think you would have any respect for something like tradition."

"Well, I don't have any myself," he told her. "But that doesn't mean I don't respect those of others."

"I don't imagine you remember much about Tatooine," she commented.

"No," he replied. 'Sand, lots of sand,' he added. "And it was hot all the time. I've never been able to get completely warm since leaving there."

In more ways than one, I'd venture, Padmé reflected.

"I remember the pod races too," he continued. "I loved them, even raced in a few myself before I was... before I left."

"Did you? Aren't they dangerous?"

"I suppose," he replied. "I like to live dangerously, Amidala."

She smiled. "No doubt why you married me," she countered.

Vader laughed. "Maybe so," he agreed, stretching his arms out with a yawn. "You didn't bring your blaster with you did you?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"I remember being frightened by it once when I woke you up," he told her. "I just want to be prepared in case it happens again."

Padmé was silent for a moment. "Go to sleep," she told him, rolling over and facing away from him.

Vader laughed and rolled onto his other side, hoping his body would soon give in and let him sleep.

Today is my birthday, he remembered as he woke up. I'm fourteen today. There hadn't been a birthday in the past ten years that had been acknowledged, however, and he knew that this one would be no different.

Rising early, as was his custom now, he took a very quick shower; all that he was permitted, and got dressed. He didn't dare keep his master waiting. Lord Sidious was a perfectionist, and expected perfection of those in his charge. Anything less was unacceptable, and would result in punishment. Young Darth Vader knew a great deal about punishment, for the past ten years had been full of it. Mistakes were costly, failure to meet or even surpass his master's expectations were painful. And yet, the young man had no one to turn to, no one who would care that he spent more nights in pain than he could count. Sidious had devoted a great deal of time and effort to the training of young Vader; he was grooming him for great things; that is what Count Dooku told the young man repeatedly. That was the justification for a life of loneliness, deprivation and cruelty. What great things? Vader had made the mistake of asking. He hadn't asked again.

"Good morning Master," Vader said in greeting as he entered the large dining room of Sidious' home.

"Vader," Sidious said, without looking up. "You're late for breakfast."

Vader felt the warmth drain from his body. "I... I'm not. I'm right on time," he protested, and then regretted it immediately. Sidious looked up at him, his yellow eyes boring into the boy.

"Count Dooku, what is the hour?" Sidious asked.

"It is three minutes past six," Dooku replied calmly as he poured cream into his caff.

Vader looked at Dooku, hating him intensely, and then back at Sidious. "Forgive me, Master," he said finally. "It's just that... today is my birthday, and..."

"Silence!" Sidious snapped. "You dare to speak back to me? After the offense of being late? I think you know the punishment for such behavior, Vader."

“Yes, master,” Vader said quietly, lowering his eyes to the cold marble floor under his feet. He closed his eyes, bracing himself for the pain that was sure to come.

Padmé’s sleep was interrupted by the erratic movements of Vader, who seemed to be in the throes of an intense dream. She sat up and looked at him, wondering if she ought to wake him. But when he shouted out, as though in pain, she knew what she had to do. Moving over to him she put her hand on his shoulder and gently shook it in an attempt to wake him up. She wasn’t successful, and so she shook him again.

“Vader wake up,” she said, shaking him more vigorously.

Vader opened his eyes with a gasp. He was discombobulated for a moment, and then felt a soft hand on his shoulder. Rolling onto his back, he looked up in dark, making out the form of his wife. “I... I had a nightmare,” he told her.

Padmé nodded. “I could tell,” she said, her hand still resting on his shoulder. “Sounded pretty intense.”

“It was,” he replied.

“Seems I’m not the only one with bad dreams,” she said, smiling wistfully.

Vader nodded.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” she asked.

“No,” he said reaching up and pushing her hair from her shoulder.

“Okay,” she replied, the feeling of his hand in her hair making her heart beat faster. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. “I know how terrible nightmares can be.”

“I’m used to them,” he told her, his hand drifting to her shoulder.

“That’s terrible,” she said.

Vader shrugged. “It’s not pleasant, but that’s my life,” he told her. “I haven’t had a lot of pleasant things happen to dream about.”

Padmé frowned. “That’s so sad,” she said softly. “Well we’ll just have to change that,” she added.

“How do you plan to do that?” he asked, her proximity rapidly pushing the images from his nightmare far from his mind.

She smiled, and bent down to him, kissing him lightly on the mouth.

“Does that help?” she asked, bracing her hands on his shoulders.

Vader looked up at her, the soft kiss sending fire through his veins. “Yes,” he said, taking her gently by the shoulders and pulling her down to him once more. Their mouths met tentatively at first, softly, but as her body relaxed into his, their kiss intensified.

At the back of his mind, Vader knew that what he was doing was very dangerous. He knew that the longer they kissed, the longer her body was pressed against his, the more difficult it would be to put a stop to it. And he had to stop it; he couldn’t let this go any further, as much as his body was responding to her, he knew that he was flirting with disaster.

Padmé was the first to break the kiss, and pulled back to look at him. She'd kissed Palo before, many times; but his kisses had never made her feel like this.

"That was...wow," she said breathlessly.

Vader smiled. "I agree, wow," he said, running his hands down from her shoulders along her arms. 'I've never felt this way, Amidala,' he told her, "never."

"Neither have I," she admitted. "I didn't know I could feel this way."

Vader shook his head. "No, me neither," he told her. He took a deep breath. "I... I don't think we should go any further, though," he said, the words leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

Padmé was confused and frowned. This was not at all what she expected. It was obvious that he was as turned on as she was, it was more than obvious.

"I don't understand," she said softly, unable to hide the injured tone in her voice. "Don't you want me?"

Vader sighed, and sat up to face her. "It isn't that," he said, taking her face in his hands. "It's very complicated."

Padmé's frown deepened. "What do you mean, complicated?"

Vader released her face and looked down. "That's all I can say," he said.

She looked at him, confused and hurt by his rejection. "You really are cruel," she said softly, and then moved away from him. She turned her back to him, her body wound tightly in a fetal position. Tears of hurt and frustration filled her eyes, and she cursed herself for lowering her guard.

Vader turned to her, wanting to say something, but knowing it was better if he didn't. He could feel the waves of hurt and feelings of rejection from her, shocking him in their intensity. *It's for the best*, he told himself as he rolled back in the opposite direction. *I'm doing the right thing, the only thing I can do... so why do I feel like garbage?* He closed his eyes, shutting Padmé's thoughts and feelings from his mind, and doing his best to forget the sensation of her body against his.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Padmé woke early the next morning, having spent a restless, uneasy night. She got out of bed, grabbing the robe she'd left on the chair beside the bed the night before. Looking over at Vader she saw that he was still asleep, and for that she was grateful. She put on the robe, cinching it tightly and headed for the fresher.

Seeing the hot tub Padmé was reminded of the previous night, and admonished herself for being so vulnerable to him. More than vulnerable, she had made herself available to him. *What were you thinking, getting in there naked with him? And then kissing him??*

Padmé made sure the door was locked before she removed her robe and nightgown, deciding that she would not make that mistake again. Yes, he was her husband, and she had been fully prepared to be a wife to him. Until he had pushed her away.

He's been playing me all along, she realized as she turned on the water in the shower. *And I've been foolish enough to let him.* Frustration filled her as she soaked her long hair under the stream of water. Surely she knew how to read the signs, surely she hadn't imagined his arousal; it had been rather obvious. *So why did he push me away? Why won't he even explain why?*

Tears filled her eyes as she stood washing her hair. The evening had started off on such a positive note, and yet it had ended in disaster. *Well that won't happen again,* she vowed. *I will not let you close again, Darth Vader. I will not allow you to play with my emotions again.*

Vader awoke alone, and heard the shower in the fresher. He sat up and looked over at the fresher. *She's still angry,* he sensed. But it was more than anger that he sensed; he had hurt her deeply, he could sense that clearly. He sighed and ran his hands through his tousled hair. *Should I just tell her the truth? Would that make things better? Or worse?*

Getting out of bed Vader pulled on a robe and then headed over to the comm. screen, he brought up the breakfast menu. Ordering a suitable selection for breakfast, he left the bedroom and sat down on one of the couches to wait for Padmé.

The events of the previous evening had surprised him tremendously. He never imagined that his wife would initiate physical intimacy between them. But she had. More than that, she had wanted it. She had wanted him. *Just as you want her,* he reflected. He had not been able to stop thinking of the kiss they'd shared, the feeling of her body on top of his. *It is weakness to feel this way,* he told himself; *it is beneath a Sith...* His mind was telling him this, but, if he were completely honest, he would have to admit that he was beginning to have his doubts. How could physical intimacy be a sign of weakness? It was natural; it was how the Maker intended things to be, wasn't it?

Vader stood up and walked over to the window, watching the sunlight reflecting on the waters of the lake beyond the hotel's courtyard. *It doesn't matter how you feel,* he reminded

himself. *You know what will happen if you give in to how you feel.* He closed his eyes, frustration filling him. He was a slave, as surely as he had been when he'd lived on Tatooine.

Padmé entered the anteroom, seeing Vader standing before the window nearby. She watched him for a moment, but when he didn't speak to her, she turned to go back into the bedroom.

"Don't go," he said, not turning to her. "Your presence is soothing."

She turned back to him, puzzled by his statement. "I don't want to disturb you," she said, her tone clearly letting him know that she had her guard up.

Vader turned to her. "You're not," he told her. He walked over to her. "I ordered breakfast," he told her.

"I'm not hungry," she said, walking over and sitting on one of the couches.

Vader wasn't surprised by her coolness and simply nodded. "I'm going to take a shower," he told her.

"I want to go out," she said as he walked away. "I'm tired of this room."

Vader stopped. "I won't be long," he said, and then continued to the fresher.

Padmé picked up one of the many brochures on the table that had been provided by the hotel. It looked like there was a lot to do in Ussa, and for that she was grateful. The thought of spending a lot of time in the hotel with Vader was not a welcome one. The door chime sounded, and Padmé stood up to answer it.

"Good morning, Milady," the young woman at the door said with a smile. She had a cart laden with food on it that she proceeded to push into the room. "Where shall I put this?"

"Anywhere is fine," Padmé replied.

The young woman pushed the cart over to the table and started setting the covered trays on it. There seemed to be an inordinately large number of them.

"Are you sure this is all for us?" Padmé asked as she walked over to the table.

"Yes m'am," the woman replied. "Your husband was very specific."

The woman pushed the cart away and left the room, leaving Padmé alone with the enormous breakfast. The smells were very appealing, and made her realize just how hungry she actually was. She sat down, and looked toward the bedroom, wishing Vader would hurry up. She'd been raised to wait for others before starting a meal, and old habits die hard. Still, having a peek at what he'd ordered was certainly permissible.

Carefully she lifted the silver domed lids, revealing one sumptuous looking dish after another. *He certainly has great taste,* she mused, resisting the temptation to start eating without him. There was one dish left that she had not investigated, and she stood up and leaned over to pick up the lid to peek at what lie beneath. What she saw surprised and startled her. A single red rose was on the china plate under the lid. There was no card, no explanation, just a single, perfect blossom.

"Good it's here," she heard Vader say from the doorway. "I'm starving."

She looked up at him as he took a seat across from her. "Did you order this?" she asked, holding the lid up to show him the rose.

He looked down at it and then up at her. "Yes," he told her. "It's for you," he added, picking it up and handing it to her.

Padmé took the flower from him, her emotions jumbled and confused.

"You don't like it?" he asked.

"Yes, I do like it," she said, sniffing the rose. "It's lovely, thank you."

Vader said nothing for a moment as he started removing the lids from their breakfast. "I... felt badly about what happened last night," he told her.

She looked up at him, surprised by his admission. "What *did* happen last night?" she asked. "I'm still confused."

Vader sighed as he started helping himself to the food. "As I said, it's very complicated," he said.

"What does that mean?" she asked. "We're married. Are you telling me you don't want a physical relationship with me?"

Vader looked up at her. "No, that's not what I'm saying at all," he told her.

"Then what is the problem?" she asked. "You can't tell me that you felt nothing when we kissed," she continued. "I know you did. It was pretty obvious when I was lying on top of you."

Vader actually felt his face grow warm at this, and he averted his eyes for a moment. "Well, you're a beautiful woman," he said. "Any man would have reacted the same way under the circumstances. You're very desirable."

"Only *you* don't desire me," she said, deciding to put it all out on the line.

"That isn't true," he countered. "I think that was fairly obvious."

"You're talking in circles," she said. "Why don't you just tell me the truth I think you owe me at least that much. I am your wife, after all."

Vader looked up at her, weighing the options before him. The way he saw it, he couldn't win whatever he decided to do. If he didn't tell her, he subjected them both to a life of frustration and misery. If he told her, he would be revealing his master's true identity as that of a Sith. And then there was the third option, to throw aside the warnings of his master and do what he wanted to do.

"You do realize that this is grounds for divorce," she told him.

"What is?"

"If a marriage is unconsummated, it can be annulled in a court of law," she told him. "Is that something you want the public to know?"

"Are you black mailing me?" he asked in disbelief.

"Well, call it what you will," she said. "At this point all I want is the truth."

Vader looked at her for a moment. “You *are* ruthless, aren’t you?” he asked.

Padmé folded her arms over her chest. “Only when I need to be,” she replied.

“Very well,” he said, deciding she’d made the choice for him. If he didn’t give her some sort of reasonable explanation, she would end the marriage and would have grounds to do so. And the media would have a field day with that bit of news. “It has to do with the Chancellor.”

Padmé frowned. “With Palpatine?? What does this have to do with him?”

“He only allowed me to marry you under the condition that there is no physical relationship between us,” he told her, the words sounding absurd to his ears.

Padmé stared at him. “You can’t be serious,” she said at last. “What right does he have to dictate such a thing?? It’s insane!”

“He is my... legal guardian,” Vader explained.

“So?” she asked. “You’re not a child, you’re a man! He can’t tell you how to live your life!”

“I’m afraid he can,” he said simply.

“But why would you agree to it?” she asked, desperate to make some sense out of it all. “Why would you go ahead with this marriage knowing that this...stipulation existed?”

“I didn’t anticipate that you would be interested in a physical relationship,” he told her. “I didn’t think it would be an issue.”

She looked at him, only half believing what he was telling her. There was more to it, far more than he was saying. What he was describing was beyond belief.

“And now that it is?” she asked. “What now? Who is more important? Your guardian or your wife?”

“It’s not that easy, Amidala,” Vader replied. “Palpatine is an unforgiving man. You asked about the scars on my back and shoulders. Where do you think they came from? I grew up in his household in constant fear of doing wrong, for the price I paid for angering him was always a high one, and always a painful one. And while I’m not afraid of pain, I don’t want you to be dragged into this. Understand this, I don’t care what he does to me, Senator. He has punished me for so many years and in so many ways I’m almost immune to it by now. But I won’t allow him to hurt you, which is what he would do if he knew that we were lovers. I’m sure of it.”

Padmé stared at him, her emotions raging within her. “What kind of a monster is he that he has done this to you?” she asked softly. “Why would he insist upon such a thing? Why would he deprive you of a physical relationship with your wife? It makes no sense!”

Vader didn’t know what to tell her. What had started out as an easy promise to make had spiraled into a huge mess. “I don’t know what to tell you,” he said at last.

“Tell me that you’re not going to let that tyrant run your life,” she said. “He has no right to do this, and you know it.”

Vader nodded. "I know," he replied quietly. 'But there's more to it than just my life,' he added. "I won't allow him to destroy your life as he has destroyed mine."

Padmé's eyes filled with tears at this statement. What had Palpatine done to this man? The scars on his body were nothing compared to the scars on his soul. "If he is denying me the right to be intimate with my own husband, then he is already destroying it," she replied.

Vader was surprised by her comment. He lowered his eyes, unable to look at her any longer. "If I had known things would turn out this way, I never would have insisted that you marry me," he told her quietly.

Padmé blinked, trying in vain to keep the tears from spilling from her eyes. "What did you expect would happen?" she asked.

"I expected you to hate me," he told her. "And I never expected that I would feel this way about you," he added, looking back up at her.

"And how is that?" she asked.

"I haven't stopped thinking about last night," he told her. "About the kiss we shared. I have never felt the way you made me feel, I didn't even know it was possible to feel that way."

"What did he do to you?" she asked finally. "What did he do to make you so afraid to feel?"

Vader frowned. "You don't want to know," he told her.

Padmé didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry," she said at last.

"So am I," he replied. And then they proceeded to eat their breakfast, an uneasy silence having settled over them both.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

Later that morning Vader and Padmé ventured out into the city to take in some of the sights and do some shopping.

"The first thing we need to get you is a set of bathing trunks," she told him as they walked into a large department store.

"I thought you said clothing was optional in the hot tub," he replied.

"It is," she said. "But trunks are definitely required for swimming in the hotel pool or in the lake," she told him.

"You want me to go swimming?" he asked, his face betraying how thrilled he was by the prospect of such a thing.

"You don't know how to swim?" she asked.

"Yes, I know how to swim," he replied as she stopped in front of a rack of men's swimming attire. "I just don't like to swim."

Padmé smiled. "Time to broaden your horizons, Lord Vader," she said. She picked up a pair of rather loudly colored trunks and held them up to show him. "What do you think?"

Vader looked at them, one eyebrow lifted. "Not quite my style," he said.

"Oh yes, you and your dark colors," she replied, hanging them up again. She looked a little further and found a dark blue pair. "What about these?"

"I suppose they'll suffice," he replied. "If I must wear them."

Padmé smiled. "You don't want to land on the holonet for indecent exposure, do you?" she asked.

"No," he replied, imagining what his master would have to say about that.

"Then it's settled," she said. "Now let's see what they have in the ladies' department," she added, handing him the trunks.

Vader took them and followed along, suddenly feeling much trapped and very married.

It was a very warm day, and Padmé had very little trouble convincing her husband to join her at the nearby beach. It was a week day, so there were not a lot of others there. Padmé had brought a blanket borrowed from the concierge and Vader had helped her spread it out on the white sand of the beach.

"Doesn't that feel wonderful?" she asked as she lay back, enjoying the sun.

"It's very hot," Vader said, lying on his side, looking at her. 'Lots of sand,' he added, picking at a few grains of sand that had strayed onto the blanket. "I hate sand. It's coarse and

ends up everywhere.”

Padmé smiled. “Well that’s why you go in the water,” she told him. “To wash it off.”

He looked out at the lake’s placid waters. Even he had to admit that they looked very tempting. “It’s probably cold,” he said.

Padmé lifted her sunglasses and looked at him. “Don’t be so negative,” she said.

He looked back at her. “Force of habit,” he told her. “You’re very fair. Did you put sun block on?”

“I knew I forgot something,” she said, sitting up. She routed around her bag and produced a bottle of sunscreen lotion. Vader watched as she proceeded to slather it on her bare arms and legs, midriff and chest. “Can you do my back?” she asked, handing him the bottle.

“Lie on your stomach,” he told her. He squirted some lotion into his large hands and moved over to her. The two piece swimsuit she wore left very little to the imagination, as Vader had already noted. He took a deep breath and brought his hands to her bare back.

Padmé jumped a bit, for the lotion was cold. But she soon relaxed under his strong hands as he moved them slowly over her. She closed her eyes as he rubbed the lotion into her skin, doing her best not to let the sensation of his touch get to her. Padmé wasn’t the only one who was trying not to be affected. Her skin was as soft as he’d imagined it to be, the curves of her body as enticing as he’d remembered from his brief glimpse of her naked body.

“That should do it,” he said.

“Thanks,” she said as he moved to lie down beside her. “You’re still quite tanned,” she said.

“Tatooine suns,” he told her as he propped himself on one elbow to face her.

“Yes, true,” she said. “I remember it being very hot there.”

“It is,” he agreed. “Plenty of sand, too,” he added.

She nodded. “Do you want to go in for a swim?” she asked.

Vader made a sour face. “No.”

Padmé looked down at him, trying not to lose her cool. It seemed that he felt compelled to find something wrong with everything she liked. “Do you have to be so negative all the time?” she asked.

“No, I don’t *have* to do anything,” he replied, knowing he was getting under her skin.

“So why did you come down here?”

“You didn’t leave me much choice.”

“Since when do you take orders from me?”

“Since you threatened to divorce me.”

“That can still be arranged you know.”

“So now if I don’t go swimming you’re going to divorce me? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Maybe.”

Vader heaved a heavy sigh and sat up. “This is extortion,” he said looking up at her.

Padmé folded her arms over her chest. “Something you’re quite well acquainted with,” she countered.

“You truly are ruthless,” he said.

Padmé rolled her eyes. “Fine, stay there,” she said, tired of arguing.

“You’re not going to divorce me, are you?” he asked, trying not to smile at her frustration.

“No,” she said. “But you might get lonely sitting here by yourself.”

He looked up at her. “I’ll live,” he replied.

She shook her head at him and walked down to the water. She waded in to her ankles, testing out the water. It was a little colder than she’d anticipated, but pleasant nonetheless. She walked a little further, and then an evil thought entered her mind. Bending over, she scooped up some water, and then looked over her shoulder to where Vader was now reclining on his back, one arm draped over his eyes. She smiled, and headed towards him.

Vader, however, knew exactly what she was up to. “You’ll regret it if you continue,” he warned her without looking up at her.

She hesitated, but only for a moment, and then tossed the handfuls of water onto his bare skin.

Vader sat up, utterly shocked that she had not listened to his warning, shocked that she was so bold. He looked up at her with an expression of utter astonishment on his face. She, on the other hand, had a smile of triumph on her face.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he said, standing up slowly.

Padmé’s smile merely grew. “Believe it,” she said, backing up. “You did say I was ruthless.”

“You’re going to pay for that, Senator,” he said, starting after her. Padmé turned and ran into the water, Vader right after her.

“I knew I’d get you into the water somehow!” she laughed as he caught up with her.

“Always scheming, aren’t you?” he asked, as he took her by the arms and turned her around.

“Absolutely,” she agreed.

“Well you know there is a penalty for your treachery,” he said, picking her up into his arms.

“No!” she squealed. “Don’t!”

But he paid her no heed and proceeded to toss her into the water. He laughed at the expression on her face as she sat in the shallow water, soaking wet. But his laughter soon

disappeared when she began to splash armfuls of water up at him. Soon he was as wet as she was, and simply gave up trying to stay dry.

"You win," he said, sitting down on the bottom of the shallow waters. 'I'm good and wet,' he told her. "Happy now?"

She moved over to him. "Yes," she said with a smile. "Now we can go swimming."

Vader knew he'd been bested, and simply followed after her as she set out for a small island in the middle of the lake.

Padmé was a strong swimmer, but found that Vader was able to keep up with her quite well. They made it to the small island within moments of each other.

"That was wonderful," Padmé said as she sat down on the sandy beach.

Vader sat down beside her. "Quite invigorating," he agreed.

Padmé lay down on her side, propping her head on one hand. "There's a place my family owns up in the mountain regions of Naboo," she told him. "It's on a lake, very much like this one. We used to go up there on school retreat, and my sister and I would swim out to the island in the lake every day."

Vader lay down facing her, merely listening to her as she spoke.

"We used to lie on the sand to dry off and try to guess the names of the birds we heard," she continued, smiling at the memory.

"You and your sister are close," he commented.

"Do you have any siblings?" she asked.

"No," he replied, tracing a line in the sand with one finger. "It was just me and my mother."

"No father?"

Vader frowned. "No, my mother used to tell me that I just came along, quite out of the blue. I just accepted it at the time, but it seems odd now."

She looked at him for a moment, hesitating before asking her next question. "Will you tell me your name? Your real name? Please?"

Vader looked at her, sensing nothing but curiosity and honest interest in him from her. How could he deny this beautiful creature such a simple thing? She had given up so much, and was so willing to put aside the nefarious methods he'd used to force her into marriage. She wanted him, she wanted to know him, and she wanted a relationship with him. How could he say no to her?

"Anakin," he told her at last. "Anakin Skywalker."

Padmé smiled. "Anakin," she said. "I like it. It suits you."

Vader looked down at the sand he was digging in. "It isn't my name anymore," he reminded her. "It hasn't been for a long time."

Padmé looked at him. There was so much pain inside of him, so much that she didn't begin to know how to reach beyond it. But perhaps just by being patient with him she would be able to. He was far more open than she had expected, and she'd started to wonder if his aloofness and coldness were merely a defense mechanism. He'd lived with so much disappointment in his life, so much pain and rejection. When was the last time he had felt anything that wasn't tinted with anger and scorn? Could he even recall a time when he'd felt wanted or even accepted? Padmé had been a keen observer of human nature for many years, and her understanding of human psychology served her well in her career. And she knew for certain that people who held a lot of pain deep down inside often projected an image of invincibility and strength, not wanting others to see what was truly going on inside of them. Was this Vader's story? Or was he simply playing with her, yet again?

"So was that so bad?" she asked. "Telling me your name?"

Vader shrugged. "I guess not," he replied.

"I like it better than Darth Vader," she said as she rolled onto her back, shielding her eyes from the sun with her arm.

"Thanks," he replied, watching her. "Is my interrogation over for today?" he asked.

Padmé moved her arm and looked up at him. "Maybe," she said. "Until I think of something else to pester you about."

"I see," he replied. "You realize of course that it works both ways."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning if I tell you something, you have to tell me something too," he replied. "It's only fair."

"Yes, that's fair," she agreed. "Go ahead. Ask me anything you want."

"Anything?" he asked. "You remember what happened the last time you used that word," he said.

"Only too well," she replied, covering her eyes up again.

Remembering that pivotal moment in both their lives gave him an idea. "Okay, answer this," he said. "Would you have gone through with your marriage to Palo if I hadn't cornered you into marrying me?"

Padmé looked up at him again, shocked by his question. "What kind of a question is that?" she asked.

"A perfectly valid one," he replied. "So answer it. You did say anything."

Padmé sat up as she considered this. "That's impossible to answer," she responded. "I know now that he'd been cheating on me. If you hadn't come into my life, I never would have known that."

"Ironic, isn't it?" he put in at this point.

"Yes, very," she agreed. "But had I never found out, I would have married him, I think. Yes, yes I would have."

"You don't sound too sure of yourself," he remarked.

"I don't want to talk about this any more," she said, looking away, annoyed that he'd opened the subject up.

"There are a great many things I don't want to talk about, and yet you insist that I do," he countered, "even to the point of threatening divorce if I don't. And besides, you did say anything."

She didn't answer him, making him think even more that his instincts were right. "You didn't love him at all, did you?" he said at last. "Admit it."

She turned back to him quickly. "I did!" she protested. "He and I had been friends for many years! I did love him!"

Vader nodded, not entirely convinced. "Okay," he said, looking down at the sand he was digging in. "So why was it that last night when we kissed you told me you'd never felt like that before? If you loved this man, surely he made you feel that way. That is, if you were in love with him as you claimed to be."

Padmé didn't know how to answer his question. She knew that she didn't love Vader; far from it. So why was it when he kissed her she felt things that she'd never felt with Palo, despite the many times he had kissed her?

"I don't know how to answer that," she admitted at last.

Vader wasn't surprised by her answer. "Well when you figure it out, let me know," he told her as he lay back on the sand with a satisfied smile.

Padmé looked over at him with a frown. What was most frustrating about his observations were that he was right. And if she was honest with herself, she would have to admit that she didn't know if she would have gone through with her marriage to Palo. But as things turned out, Vader had actually done her a favor by insisting that she marry him. *Ironic indeed*, she mused as she turned her face towards the sun once more.

"So what do you like to do for fun?" she asked, deciding to change the subject. "Assuming you're allowed to have fun, that is."

Fun? He thought, realizing that he couldn't name a single thing. "Well, I like racing," he said finally.

"Watching or actually racing?"

"Both," he replied. 'I like to fix things, and build things,' he added. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you don't like shopping, and you don't like swimming," she said, sitting up. "I thought you'd like to do something that you enjoy next. Maybe it will put an end to your complaining," she couldn't resist adding.

"How about lunch?" he suggested. "I like eating."

"So I noticed," she replied. 'I'm serious, though,' she continued. "Are there any races here?"

“Not that I’m aware of,” he replied. ‘I’m starving,’ he added. “As much as I hate the thought of going in the water again, I’m afraid there are no alternatives.”

“No, I’m afraid not,” she replied. She sat up. “Great, I have sand in my bathing suit,” she said, brushing sand from under the top of her suit.

“I told you it got everywhere,” Vader told her as he watched her for a moment. ‘Tell me something,’ he said. “If you had that bathing suit why did you go into the hot tub naked last night?”

She stopped what she was doing and looked at him. “You didn’t seem to mind,” she replied.

“Oh I didn’t, believe me,” he replied. “I was just curious why you decided to allow me the pleasure of seeing your naked body.”

She was taken aback by his comment. “Was it a pleasure?” she asked. “Did you enjoy seeing it?”

Vader nodded. “I should think that was fairly obvious,” he remarked with a smile.

Padmé felt her face grow warm. “Well, now that you mention it,” she said.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” he persisted.

Padmé sighed. “I don’t know, I guess I just felt comfortable doing so,” she replied. ‘We’re married now, after all,’ she pointed out. “It’s not like you weren’t going to see my body at some point.”

Vader nodded. “True,” he replied. ‘Still,’ he said, reaching over and tracing one finger along her arm. “It was a pleasant surprise. Your body is spectacular.”

“You think so?”

“Absolutely,” he told her, moving closer to her and kissing her softly.

Padmé was surprised by his overture and moved back for a moment. He looked at her questioningly.

“I won’t tolerate you toying with my emotions,” she told him. “I can put up with a lot, but that’s something I will not stand for.”

Vader looked at her for a moment. It was not surprising that she was still on her guard, for he had not been completely forthcoming with her and, he suspected, she knew it. “I told you once that you could trust me,” he said. “Do you remember that?”

Padmé nodded.

“So trust me now,” he said, drawing one finger down the side of her face. ‘I don’t know what this is growing between us, but there is something there. I feel it, and I know you do too. I’m tired of fighting, Amidala,’ he said, drawing her closer once more. “Aren’t you?”

At the back of her mind Padmé knew that there was a possibility that he was manipulating her; but hadn’t that been what she’d done the previous night in the hot tub? She nodded, too

mesmerized by his magnetic lure to resist. Instead she wrapped her arms around his neck as their kiss deepened, allowing him to roll her onto her back.

Vader knew he was tempting fate, but he couldn't help himself. He was so drawn to her that he wasn't able to resist, and, quite frankly, didn't want to. He brought one hand to her and brought it up over the curve of her hip, and then over the flat plain of her abdomen. Padmé closed her eyes when his mouth moved to her neck, the sensation of his soft kisses sending heat through her body.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured against her ear. He lifted his head and looked down at her, and in his eyes she could see the struggle between what he wanted and what he knew he shouldn't do. She took his face in her hands and kissed him again, as though to help him make the choice.

Her kiss emboldened him, and he slipped his hand under the fabric of her damp suit. The feel of his hand upon her sent her heart racing, and she pulled his body closer.

Padmé closed her eyes, losing herself in the moment. She had she ever felt anything like this, and she never wanted it to stop.

Vader had gone past the point of reasoning, and decided he didn't care. He would gladly take any punishment his master could mete out for the moment of sheer pleasure he felt. Her body was responding to his touch so naturally that he simply stopped for a moment to admire her.

Padmé opened her eyes and looked up at him, afraid that he had decided that it was time to stop before things went too far. But he was simply looking at her, an indiscernible expression on his face.

"What is it?" she asked, taking his face in her hands once more.

"Nothing," he said. "I just can't get over how beautiful you are."

She smiled. "I'm glad you feel that way," she said, playing with his hair.

"I can't resist you, Senator," he told her softly. "You're like a fever in my blood, and I'm helpless to fight it."

"Don't fight it," she told him. "This is how it's supposed to be. Palpatine has twisted your mind to the point where you don't know what's right and what's wrong any more."

Vader lowered his eyes. "I don't know what to believe any more," he admitted to her. "I've never been so confused."

"I know you are," she told him. "But you have to trust me. I will never lie to you, I will never hurt you the way he has. Will you trust me?"

Vader had not trusted anyone besides Palpatine in a very long time. But now she was making him question that trust, question everything that he'd based his life on for the past fifteen years.

"Yes, I trust you," he told her at last. "But you realize that this is not going to be easy."

"No, perhaps not," she agreed. "But I'm willing to try, are you?"

Vader nodded. “Yes,” he replied. “You’re worth the effort,” he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled. “I’m happy you think so,” she said as she pulled him close to kiss him again. Their tender moment was interrupted, however, by the sound of an approaching boat.

“Looks like we’re about to have an audience,” Vader commented, looking toward the boat with a frown.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, it looks that way,” she agreed as he helped her sit up. “Let’s get going.”

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

The swim back was useful to both, as it served to cool the fires of desire that had taken both Vader and Padmé by storm. Upon reaching the shore, Vader picked up Padmé's robe that she had left on a lounge chair and helped her into it.

"Lunch, Senator?" he asked her.

"Are we allowed on the patio in our bathing suits?" she asked.

"Yes," he decided as he put on his own robe.

She smiled. "Is that your rule or the hotel's?"

Vader smiled. "Mine," he said, taking her hand. "Let's go."

They found a table on the patio and sat down, Vader, of course, pulling out Padmé's chair for her. No sooner had they taken their seats when a serving droid came over to them.

"Good afternoon," it said as it activated menus in front of each of them. "May I get you a beverage to start?"

"Iced tea for me," Padmé said.

"Water," Vader told the droid.

The droid was about to leave when Padmé called it back. "Can you tell us if there are any race tracks here? Or anywhere on the planet?"

"No, Milady," the droid replied. "It's against city ordinances."

Vader rolled his eyes but said nothing. Padmé was not put off, however, and continued to question the droid.

"How far is Tatooine from here?" she asked the droid, earning a look of surprise from her husband.

"Not far, Milady," the droid replied. "Two perhaps three parsecs at the most."

"Thank you," Padmé said, looking at Vader.

"You don't really want to go to Tatooine, do you?" Vader asked when the droid had left them.

She nodded. "You want to see the races, I know you do."

Vader laughed. "So now you can read minds too, can you?" he teased.

Padmé smiled. "No, I just know you're too stubborn to admit it."

"I see," he said, looking down at the table. He reached over and took her hand. "I'm not sure I want to go back there, that's all."

"Because of your mother?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "I don't want to see her," he told her.

"I can understand that," she said. "But sometimes you have to face the past in order to move ahead. Besides, haven't you always wanted to ask her why she did what she did?"

"Yes, I have," he replied. 'It has never made any sense to me,' he told her. "She was always so kind and gentle, so loving," he added, a frown forming on his brow. "Why would she give me up like that? For money??"

Padmé didn't know what to say; for she had no idea how any mother could do such a thing. "That's what you need to ask her," she said.

Vader didn't reply, for the thought of confronting his mother that way was more than he wanted to consider. He couldn't imagine what response she could give that wouldn't reopen the wounds of the past all over again.

"Are you ready to order?"

Vader and Padmé looked up at the droid who had returned with their drinks.

"Yes we are," Padmé replied, seeing that her husband was lost in his own thoughts.

Upon returning to their room, Vader and Padmé headed into the bedroom to get changed.

Neither said anything as they stood in the bedroom taking off their robes. Padmé reflected on how a mere few days ago they had dressed with their backs to one another, and now here they were, taking in every detail of the other unabashedly. Part of her wanted to hold back; still afraid that he would end things right when they were get interesting. But the sight of his tanned, muscular body was more than she could resist, particularly when he was looking at her with obvious desire in his eyes.

"Any sand in your suit?" he asked as he walked over to her.

"I don't know," she said as she reached behind her and unclasped the top of her bikini. "Let me check."

Vader watched as she removed the top, his eyes moving over her body. "I don't see any," he said.

"That's good," she said, feeling her heart starting to race. He brought his hands to her and traced them up over her body to her shoulders. "None here either," he said as his hands moved slowly down her arms.

Padmé brought her hands to his chest, the tautness of his chiseled muscles only making her excitement greater. Both were too intent on exploring the body of the other to continue the joke, and so they fell silent as their hands moved over the other, desperate to touch each centimeter of the other.

"Come here," he said, taking her by the hand and leading her to the bed. Padmé allowed him to take control, even for just the moment, and joined him on the bed. Once there, she

pushed him so that he was lying on his back. He looked up at her in surprise, a smile on his face.

“Senator Amidala, I had no idea you were so aggressive,” he teased.

“I am only when I have to be,” she told him with a smile as she kissed him. Vader wrapped his arms around her waist, neither of them strong enough to resist the other. His hands moved up the sides of her body. She broke the kiss and looked at him. ‘I would think you would appreciate that quality, Lord Vader,’ she teased. “A man of power such as yourself.”

Vader smiled at her. “You have a great many qualities I appreciate, Senator,” he replied. His mouth grazed slowly up her neck towards her ear. ‘Beauty,’ he said, nibbling on her earlobe, “intelligence, determination,” he continued.

“Don’t forget ruthlessness,” she told him.

“Ah yes,” he said. ‘We mustn’t forget ruthlessness,’ he said, running his hands from her hips up over the curves of her body. “Or aggression,” he said. “A highly underrated quality,” he continued, kissing her.

Padmé merely closed her eyes as his kisses slowly undid her. She ran her hands into Vader’s long wavy hair as he kissed her neck.

Vader looked up at her face, the expression of utter rapture sending his own excitement higher. It had been so long since he had felt any emotion towards anyone that wasn’t tinted with darkness that he scarcely knew how to act. At this point he was merely letting instinct take over, the innate need to connect to another human being, his mate. The fact that she accepted him with all that he had done astounded him, awed him even. She was like an angel that had been sent to him, an angel to show him the way out of the misery and pain he had been mired in for so long.

“Are you an angel?” he asked.

Padmé opened her eyes and looked up at him. “What did you say?”

“I remember hearing stories about the angels of Iago when I was a boy,” he told her. “The deep space pilots who had seen them said they were the most beautiful creatures in the universe,” he added.

Padmé felt her eyes grow moist at his words, with the innocence with which he spoke them, an innocence that belied that man he had become, the man that Palpatine’s cruelty had created. “I’m not an angel,” she told him.

“I think you are,” he countered as he moved up to softly caress her face. “My angel,” he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled. “I can live with that,” closing her eyes once more as he brought his mouth to her neck. His hands moved lower, tracing the contours of her body. He had just reached the waistband of her swimsuit when a comlink started to sound. Vader looked up at her, not recognizing the tone.

“It’s yours,” he told her. “You want to get it?” he asked rolling onto his side.

"No," she told him as she moved over to him, needing to touch him once more. She ran her hands up over his broad chest, moving closer to plant a line of kisses up his neck as her hands reached his shoulders. Vader closed his eyes, her touch eroding away what little resolve he had left.

And then his comlink started.

They both opened their eyes and looked at each other as the two comms beeped incessantly.

"Damn it," Vader growled as Padmé got up, realizing they would have no peace until they responded.

"Duty calls," she told him, looking to find her com as he got up to do the same.

En route to Tatooine...

"I hate this ship," Vader grumbled as they made their way to Tatooine later that afternoon. "It's archaic."

"It was your idea," Padmé reminded him.

"Well it would be too easy for the Chancellor to find out we were on Tatooine if we took my ship," he pointed out. "He would no doubt have issues with that."

"No doubt," she said, finding it interesting that he would. "I wonder why that would be," she mused.

"I imagine it has something to do with my mother," Vader replied. "He never liked it when I asked about her."

I wonder why, she thought, growing more suspicious than ever. "That's odd, don't you think?"

"Odd?" he said, looking over at her. "I suppose, I've never really thought about it."

"You mean you were never allowed to think about it," she pointed out.

Vader frowned. "Are you trying to make a point, Senator?"

"Only that you have been a slave to that man for too long," she replied, not caring if she angered him.

Vader couldn't deny what she was saying, for he felt the very same way. And yet, it had only been recently that he had begun to feel confined by his fealty to the chancellor. Only since he had realized that he was no longer interested in breaking Senator Amidala. Only since he'd discovered what a truly extraordinary woman she was.

"Get ready to engage the sub light engines," he told her as their destination approached.

Padmé did so, and within moments the luminous brown orb of Tatooine appeared on the screen.

Vader stared at his home world, seeing it for the first time in fifteen years. A tumult of emotions raged through him as he did so, not the least of which was anger: anger that his mother had given him away, anger that he had not been permitted to speak of her for fifteen

years, anger that he still cared about her. Padmé could see his hands tightening on the steering mechanism, knowing that this was very difficult for him. But she also knew that he needed to do this, to confront the past and resolve it so that he could move on with his life.

“Are you okay?” she asked, leaning over and putting a hand on his shoulder.

Vader glanced at her briefly. “Of course,” he lied. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Padmé sat back, knowing better. But she said nothing as they finished their approach to the planet below.

“I think it would be prudent if you didn’t call me by my real name while we’re here,” Vader said as he sat the ship down.

“I never call you by your real name,” Padmé replied.

Vader looked at her. “You know what I mean,” he said.

“You mean Darth Vader,” she said.

“Yes, don’t call me that while we’re here,” he said. “You never know who might hear.”

“Good idea,” she agreed. “I’ll just call you Anakin,” she said, secretly pleased that she’d have a reason to do so.

“I suppose that’s acceptable,” he replied as he stood up. “Your name is rather notable too,” he added.

“Then use my first name,” she suggested as she stood up to join him.

“And what is that?” he asked.

Padmé frowned, unable to believe he didn’t know. “Padmé, my name is Padmé.”

Vader nodded. “Very well,” he said. “Padmé it shall be.”

Boonta Eve was very crowded when Padmé and Vader arrived. Beings of dozens of different races were assembled in the huge stadium to watch the pod race that was about to begin. Vader held onto Padmé’s hand tightly as they made their way through the throngs of loud, excited patrons looking for a place to sit.

“Up here,” he said, leading her up to what appeared to be a perfect vantage point to view the race.

“But there’s no room,” Padmé protested.

Vader gave her a knowing smile, and then continued on his way.

“You don’t want to sit here,” he told the group of boisterous beings upon reaching their level. “You want us to have this place.”

The beings looked at him for a moment, and then moved off at once, leaving half the section empty for Vader and Padmé.

“Nice seats,” she said as she sat down.

“But of course,” he replied as he moved over to join her. But then he stopped as a strong feeling came over him.

Padmé looked up at him. “What’s the matter?” she asked. When he didn’t reply she reached over and took his hand. “Anakin?”

Vader didn’t react at first, but then he turned to her. “She’s here,” he told her.

Padmé frowned. “Who?”

“My mother,” he told her. “She’s here, and she’s close by. I can feel her presence.”

Padmé stood up beside him and looked around. “Can you see her?” she asked.

Vader shook his head. “No, but I know she’s here. Her presence is unmistakable to me.”

Padmé didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t tell if he was happy or unhappy about this discovery. “Let’s sit down,” she suggested. “Looks like the race is about to start.”

Vader sat down, but felt certain that he would be too distracted to enjoy the race. He was conflicted with powerful emotions as he sought out his mother among the huge crowds that surrounded them. Although she was not Force sensitive, he had always felt a connection with her, and had always been able to sense her emotions. He was startled to discover that this was still true, and the emotions he sensed from her confused him. Great waves of sadness were emanating from Shmi, as though she were heart broken about something. Did she remember her young boy sitting here at Boonta Eve? Did she regret what she had done? Was it her conscience that he sensed, eating away at her now? *Why would it? It’s been fifteen years, why would she care after all this time?*

“Are you okay?”

Vader looked over at his wife, who was watching him closely. “I’m not sure how I feel,” he told her.

She gave his hand a squeeze. “Try to enjoy the race,” she said. “And if we meet her, we’ll handle it. I’ll be here with you, remember?”

Vader nodded. “Yes, I know,” he replied, holding onto her hand. But despite her assurances, he was not able to but his mother out of his mind, even when the gong sounded to start the race.

Padmé did her best to involve Vader in the race, asking him questions about strategies, about his own experiences, but she couldn’t shake the impression that he was only half watching. Clearly his mind was elsewhere, and Padmé realized that it would be until such time as he confronted his mother.

The heat was oppressive, as Padmé soon remembered. The conclusion of the race didn’t come quickly enough for her, for she was growing claustrophobic surrounded by so many bodies.

“Did you enjoy that?” she asked Vader as they stood up to wait for the crowds to thin before making their way to the exit.

Vader nodded. "He cheated," he told her. "The winner usually does," he added with a smile.

"Is that so?" she responded. "Did you cheat?" she asked with a smile.

"I never won," he told her. "Never had the chance."

"Not that you would have cheated," she put in.

He shook his head. "No, I don't believe in cheating," he said. "It's dishonorable and cowardly."

"I agree," she said. "Looks like we can get out now," she said.

"You seem anxious to leave," he commented as they started down the stairs.

"It's very hot," she told him. "I'm not used to it, that's all."

"I'm afraid there are no lakes nearby to cool off in either," he said as he took her hand.

"Don't worry about me," she replied. "I'm pretty tough."

Vader smiled. "So I've noticed," he responded. He brought her hand up to his mouth to kiss it. "Another quality of yours I appreciate."

They started down the stairs and had almost reached the bottom when Vader stopped in his tracks. Padmé looked up him, and saw that his eyes had fallen upon a small group of humans nearby. Among them was a woman who looked as though she could be old enough to be Vader's mother.

"Is that her?" Padmé asked him.

Vader nodded, not taking his eyes from Shmi. "That's her," he said quietly. Seeing her again after so many years churned up emotions in him that he'd thought he'd long since stopped feeling. Or so he'd thought. He watched as his mother spoke to the people she was with, a man about fifty and a younger man and young woman. He didn't recognize any of them, but didn't care. And then, almost as though she knew she was being watched, Shmi looked up, and straight into the eyes of her son.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Padmé squeezed Vader's hand, letting him know that she was with him as they made their way over to where his mother stood watching him approach. Shmi left the group she was with, offering no explanation to any of them, and ran to meet Vader, the expression on her face a mixture of shock and elation.

"Ani!!" she cried, running to him. "Ani, my Ani!!"

Vader had not heard his nickname in fifteen years, and it was a struggle for him not to lose control of his emotions upon hearing it. He stopped as Shmi reached him, freezing in his tracks as she threw her arms around his neck. She wasn't able to say anything as she hugged him tightly, her emotions preventing her from speaking. Vader did not return her embrace, and finally it was him who spoke first.

"Hello Mom," he said his voice devoid of emotion. She looked up at him, confused by his aloofness.

"Anakin, we haven't seen one another in fifteen years!" she said. "Aren't you happy to see me?"

The hurt tone in her voice grabbed at Padmé's heart, and she had to look away lest she start to cry.

"Happy to see you?" Vader asked, his tone edged with anger. "You sold me like a slave and now you expect me to be happy to see you?"

Shmi stared at him, her eyes growing wide with alarm. "Sold you??" she cried. "What are you talking about? Anakin you disappeared fifteen years ago! How could you think I would do such a thing?"

Vader could feel his heart starting to pound in his chest as he filled with anxiety. "I didn't just disappear, and you know it," he replied.

"Anakin, you know me," Shmi said, taking him by the arms. The gentleness and calm in her dark eyes amazed Padmé, who watched the exchange in silence. "Why would I do such a thing to you? You were everything to me! You were my universe! Who told you such a horrible lie?"

A lie?? A horrible lie?? "You mean... Watto didn't give you the money?" Vader stammered, his control starting to slip. "The money that Count Dooku gave him?"

Shmi shook her head. "Watto gave me nothing," she said. "When you didn't come home when you normally did I went to the shop. He told me that you'd already left, and that's when I started to worry. I asked around the town and Jira told me about a white haired man who came asking about you."

Vader listened to the rest of his mother's narrative, how she tried to track Dooku's ship, how she spent what little money she had to do so, how she spent weeks without sleep, days without eating worrying....all because of a lie. But she was not the only one who'd been lied to...

"He won't get away with this," Vader said at last, his voice full of anger. He looked at Padmé. 'Stay here,' he said. "I have a score to settle."

"Anakin wait," Shmi said, taking his hand as he started to go. "Where are you going?"

Vader looked back at her, and Shmi was shocked to see that his eyes had turned yellow. "Watto will pay for his lies, Mom," he told her. "I will make him pay."

He turned and ran off, leaving Padmé and Shmi behind, helpless to stop him.

Shmi turned to Padme, as through noticing her for the first time. "What's wrong with him? I've never seen him like this!"

Padmé sighed. "He's not the same person he was when you saw him last," she told her. "He's had a terrible life since he was taken from you, Mrs. Skywalker."

"Who did this to him?" Shmi asked.

"Shmi? What the blazes is going on?"

Shmi and Padmé turned to see Shmi's companions standing there.

"It was Anakin, Cliegg," Shmi told him. "He's here, he's alive!"

Cliegg was as shocked as Shmi was to hear it. "What? Where is he? Where has he been all this time?"

"He's been under the guardianship of an evil, cruel man," Padmé told them both. "He's the reason Anakin is the way he is now."

Cliegg looked at her. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Padmé," she replied. "I'm Anakin's wife," she added, looking back at Shmi.

"Anakin's wife?" Shmi replied in surprise. "How long have you been married? He's not even twenty!"

"Only a few days," Padmé told her. "We're still on our honeymoon, actually."

"So where is he?" the young man who was with Cliegg asked.

"Padmé this is my husband, Cliegg, and his son, Owen, and his wife, Beru," Shmi said.

"I guess that makes you our sister," Owen said, shaking Padmé's hand.

"I suppose so," Padmé replied. "I don't mean to be abrupt, but we really need to get to Anakin before he does something terrible. Believe me, he's capable of just about anything in the state he's in."

"He's gone to see Watto," Shmi told Cliegg.

"Why?" Cliegg asked.

"I'll explain on the way," Shmi said. 'Let's go,' she added, looking at Padmé, having no doubt that her son's wife knew him well enough to be alarmed. "Before something terrible happens."

Cliegg nodded, and then the group headed to the exit.

Vader arrived at the junk shop where he'd spent many hours as a young boy in the service of Watto, the tight fisted Toydarian who'd been his owner. The sight of the shop brought a wave of memories, most of them unpleasant. He pushed them down inside of him, which only served to augment his anger. Without another moment's hesitation, he entered the shop, determined to have his revenge.

The shop was just as he'd remembered; even the smells of oil and dirt were the same. Looking behind him he used the Force to lock the door, for he wanted no interruptions.

"Hi chuba da naga? (What do you want?)"

Vader looked over to see Watto enter the shop, fluttering on his gauzy wings. He said nothing, the sight of the creature making his fists tighten in blind rage.

"What do you want?" Watto asked again. "Are you deaf??"

"I'm here to settle a score," Vader said at last

"Eh? What are you talking about?" Watto grumbled.

Vader made no reply, which only made Watto more nervous. Suddenly from behind him he heard the back door slam shut, and every window in the shop as well. The nervous creature looked at Vader, flying forward to get a closer look at the strange man. "Who are you, anyway?" he asked.

Vader lowered the hood of his cloak. "You don't recognize your old slave, Watto?" he asked in Huttese.

Watto looked hard at the man, and then backed up when he recognized him. "Ani?" he said. "Little Ani?"

"Not so little," Vader replied, stepping closer. From across the room a metal bar came flying across and struck Watto square in the back of his head. "And no longer Anakin," Vader added, hurling another piece of equipment at the creature.

"Ani, please!" Watto cried, trying to dodge the projectiles that were coming at him more steadily now as Vader stood and stared at him with eyes that glowed yellow and red. "I didn't mean no harm! It was a mistake!"

"A mistake?" Vader repeated. 'You put my mother through hell for fifteen years because of your greed and you call it a *mistake*?' he roared. The objects started coming at Watto faster, and he was unable to avoid them. Struck in the head, struck in the midsection, in the back, Watto was soon battered and bloodied to the point where he was no longer able to maintain himself aloft. He fell to the grimy floor of the shop, his blood mixing with the dust and filth. And still Vader did not relent. He walked over to the dying creature, showing neither mercy nor remorse for the wretched state it was in. "I hope you suffer where you're going, Watto," he growled, "as much as I've suffered, as much as my mother has suffered. I hope you suffer for an eternity and then some you lying son of a bitch." He punctuated his final statement

with one last blow to the Toydarian, who gave onelast gasp as his broken body finally succumbed to death. Vader looked at Watto laying there, his eyes staring vacantly into space. Satisfied that vengeance had been served, Vader left the shop, leaving the grisly scene behind him.

Walking out into the street, Vader stopped as he saw Padmé and his mother coming towards him.

“Anakin, thank the Maker we got here in time,” Shmi said as she ran over to him. ‘I want to talk to Watto as much as you do,’ she said, heading towards the shop. “He owes both of us an explanation.” She was stopped by her son taking her by the arm.

“Don’t go in there,” he told her.

Shmi looked up at him. “Why not?” she asked. “I have a lot I want to say to him too, Anakin,” she told him, pulling her arm free and heading toward the shop.

“Mom, don’t!” Vader warned, but he wasn’t fast enough to prevent Shmi from entering the shop.

But Shmi didn’t heed his warning, and walked into the shop. “Watto I want to talk to you,” she called as she entered the shop. It was far more disorganized than usual, and she received no answer to her call. ‘Watto, come in here and talk to me! Watto?’ she walked into the shop and stopped in her tracks when something caught her eye. Turning slowly she screamed when she saw the horribly beaten body of Watto lying in a pool of blood. She backed away, shaking her head. “No, Anakin didn’t do this,” she told herself. “Not my Ani, not my boy!”

She stumbled out of the shop and into the street where Vader stood waiting for her. She looked up at him, unable to even put into words what she was feeling.

“I avenged us, Mom,” Vader told her, taking her gently by the shoulders. “I made him pay for what he did.”

Shmi shook her head. “Anakin, what have you done?” she asked quietly, her voice betraying the horror she felt over what she’d witnessed. “You killed him! You murdered him!”

Vader frowned. This was not the response he expected. “He deserved to die for the way he lied to you, Mom! He put you through Hell all these years for nothing! Because he was too greedy to give you the money, to tell you the truth! If he’d told you, you might have been able to stop Dooku from taking me away!”

Shmi’s eyes filled with tears as she realized that Padmé was right; this was not the sweet innocent boy she’d lost. This man was dark, dangerous and violent. “What happened to you?” she asked, taking his face in her hands at last. “My poor Ani,” she added, the tears falling down her face.

Vader looked into his mother’s eyes, seeing the sadness there. *Why isn’t she happy? We’re together now! Why doesn’t she understand that I did what I had to do??*

“Perhaps we ought to go to your home,” Padmé suggested, stepping in at this point. “You two have a lot to talk about.”

Vader and Shmi looked at her.

“You’re right,” Shmi said. ‘There is a lot we need to talk about,’ she said, looking back at her son. “A lot of catching up to do,” she added, forcing herself to smile at him.

Vader nodded. He turned to his wife. She was watching him, but not with the same guardedness as his mother. Padmé knew what he was, she had seen this side of him before, and wasn’t surprised at all by what he had done. He walked over to her and took her hand as they proceeded wordlessly to the hangar bay.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Vader was silent as he and Padmé followed the directions given to them by Cliegg Lars. Padmé could see that he was deeply troubled, and she was at a loss to know what to say to make things better for him. What could she say? What could anyone say or do to change what had happened?

“Anakin?” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

“My mother thinks I’m a monster,” he said without looking at her. “Did you see the way she looked at me?”

“She has no idea what you’ve been through,” Padmé told him. “She’s bound to be shocked by what happened. She remembers you as a little boy.”

Vader said nothing for a moment as he struggled to control the monumental anger he felt. “Palpatine will pay for this,” he told her. “Watto’s end will seem merciful when I’m finished with him.”

Padmé frowned, the darkness she had tried so hard to ignore slapping her square in the face. “You can’t simply walk into the Chancellor’s office and kill him like you killed Watto,” she told him.

Vader looked at her with a frown. “You disapprove?” he asked.

“I didn’t say that,” she replied.

“You didn’t need to,” he retorted. “I know how you feel about violence.”

“You’re right, I hate violence,” she admitted. “But I know you did what you felt you had to do.”

“I’m glad you can see that,” Vader replied.

“But you can’t do the same thing to Palpatine,” she pointed out. “He’s the chancellor; you’d never get away with it.”

“Palpatine will pay for what he did to me,” Vader told her. “I don’t care what the ramifications are; I will have my revenge, Senator.”

Padmé looked away, too upset to say anything else. How could she reason with such blind rage? It was like they were on different wave lengths when the darkness took a hold of him. “And what about me?” she asked. “What about us? If you go through with this you would be put in prison for life.”

Vader was silent for a moment before he replied. “Are you suggesting I simply forget about what he did? Forget about fifteen years of abuse? Fifteen years he robbed from me, from my mother?” he asked acrimoniously.

“Of course I’m not suggesting that,” she replied. “I’m simply telling you that you can’t just kill him.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, shaking his head as the ship started its decent. “How could you understand? You’ve had a comfortable life, you’ve never wanted for anything. You don’t know what it’s like to lie awake night after night, unable to sleep because you’re too afraid to, because you’re in too much pain to sleep. You have no idea what this man has done to me, Senator. None.”

Padmé could feel her eyes fill with tears of frustration and hurt. Where was the man who she’d so very nearly made love to that very morning? He’d been replaced by a dark, vindictive stranger who was so bent on revenge that he cared for nothing else.

“We’re here,” he said as the ship landed.

Padmé nodded and stood up at once, not saying a word. Vader watched her go, knowing that she was hurt by his coldness; but the rage that he was filled with precluded him from reaching out to her. He had never felt rage like this, all encompassing, all consuming. Vader sat back in the pilot’s chair, running his hands through his hair. *Anger is the way of the Dark Side, the way of the Sith*, he told himself; *and from now on I reject the Sith, I reject everything that bastard ever taught me, every filthy word, every malicious lie...* But what was the alternative? He had spent most of his life living by the precepts of the Sith, and knew no other way to live.

Realizing that the others were waiting for him, Vader got up and headed for the exit of the ship. Padmé was already outside, the hood of her cloak pulled up to hide her face. But even without seeing he knew that she was crying, he could feel her sense of emptiness as clearly as his own.

“Let’s go inside,” he told her.

Padmé said nothing in response and simply walked at his side as they headed towards the homestead.

Shmi and Cliegg were waiting at the bottom of the stairs and looked up when they saw Vader and Padmé.

“Come inside,” Shmi said, taking Vader’s hand.

Vader simply nodded and allowed his mother to lead him inside. Padmé followed behind with Cliegg. Shmi’s husband didn’t have to be Force sensitive to see how upset Padmé was. He wondered how such a seemingly gentle soul could have ended up married to a man capable of the sort of violence Shmi had described to him. Clearly there was more to the situation than any of them realized.

Shmi and Vader were seated at a table when Padmé and Cliegg joined them. Padmé sat down beside Vader, noting that he did not pull out her chair for her as he usually did. She looked at him, seeing how tense he was, how tightly wound. She only hoped his mother would have more luck reaching him than she had. *And I thought we were getting closer*, she thought miserably. She willed herself not to cry and folded her hands tightly on the tabletop, giving Shmi her full attention.

“Anakin, I want you to tell me what happened on that day,” Shmi began. “I need to understand how this happened.”

Vader took a deep breath before he began. “It was midday, I remember because I’d just finished my lunch,” he began. “I was out in the back when Watto came out with this old man I’d never seen before. He told me that this man was taking me with him, that you’d given him permission to take me, and that you’d been compensated. I didn’t know what that meant, so Watto told me. He told me that you’d been well paid, and that it would give you a better life. I really didn’t have a choice about going with him. I remember being very afraid of him. With good reason as it turned out,” he finished, a frown forming on his brow.

“So he took you? This man?” Shmi asked.

Vader nodded. “Yes, he took me to his ship,” he remembered. “I asked why I couldn’t see you, and he told me that you’d washed your hands of me, that you didn’t want me anymore.”

Shmi’s eyes filled with tears. “Oh Ani,” she said quietly. ‘You believed that? Surely you knew better!’

Vader looked at his mother. “I was four, Mom, what did I know? All I knew was that he was taking me away, and that you were no where around. I didn’t know he was lying to me, and I certainly had no forewarning of the nightmare that my life was about to become.”

“Who was this man?” Shmi asked. “And why did he take you away? What did he want from you?”

“His name is Count Dooku,” Vader replied. ‘And at the time he was the apprentice to an evil monster by the name of Lord Sidious,’ he explained. “Sidious is a Dark Lord of the Sith,” he added, looking at Padmé. “And is otherwise known as Chancellor Palpatine.”

Padmé stared at him in shock. “Palpatine is a Sith?” she cried.

Vader nodded.

“What is a Sith?” Cliegg asked at this point.

“The Sith are the opposite of the Jedi,” Vader explained. “It is ancient order of Force-practitioners devoted to the dark side and determined to destroy the Jedi,” he continued.

“You’re telling us that the Chancellor of the Republic is one of these....Sith?” Cliegg asked in shock. “And no one cares?”

“No one knows,” Vader said. ‘The dark side is hard to detect if so desired. Sidious has been able to keep his true nature a secret, even though he maintains a guise as a very public figure,’ he explained. “As have I,” he added quietly.

“You’re a Sith?” Shmi asked, hardly able to bring herself to ask the question. “You, Anakin?”

“I became the apprentice of Sidious two years ago when Count Dooku betrayed him and took up with the Separatists and their army,” Vader told her. “I have been trained in the ways of the Sith for the past fifteen years.”

Padmé stared at him, her heart feeling as though it was being crushed by an invisible hand. “You’re a Sith?” she asked him. “And you’ve never told me??”

Vader looked at her, hating the expression in her eyes. "I... I couldn't tell you," he said. "Sidious would have killed me if I had."

"But she knows now," Shmi pointed out. "We all know, Anakin."

Vader nodded, looking back at his mother. "Now that I know the truth, I renounce Sidious," he told her. 'I renounce everything he stands for,' he added, his anger resurfacing. "And I won't rest until he pays for what he did to me, to us," he added.

"Revenge is never the way, Anakin," Shmi told him. "Anger and hatred are never a solution for anything."

Vader lowered his eyes to the table top. "It's all I know, Mom," he admitted quietly. "My master taught me well."

Shmi shook her head, her eyes filling with tears. She looked at Padmé who was as devastated as her mother-in-law.

"What did that man do to you, Ani?" Shmi asked finally.

Vader looked up at her. "You don't want to know, Mom," he told her.

"Yes I do," Shmi returned. "I need to know, Anakin. I need to know what that monster did to my little boy."

Vader looked down, and Padmé could see that he was struggling. Tentatively she reached over and put a hand on top of his that were clasped on the table top. Vader looked up at her, surprised and yet grateful for the gesture. He took her hand in his, steadying himself with her support. And then he looked up at his mother.

"You have to understand the philosophy of the Sith," he began. "They thrive on anger, on fear and hatred. And over the course of my... apprenticeship, I became well acquainted with those emotions. In fact, I knew nothing else. Fear he ensured by leaving me alone in a dark room every night, with the door locked. I was dehydrated more times than I can count just from crying, but soon I learned that was not acceptable. The physical punishment he inflicted on me for the most innocuous of things only added to my fear. Not only that, it created in me more anger than I had ever known. But you see, that is what he wanted. He wanted me to be angry, he fed off of it. It was through that anger that he nurtured the innate skills that I possessed, and he taught me to use that anger to my advantage. I grew to hate him over the years, and he wanted that too. The more he punished me, the stronger I became.' He stopped for a moment, sensing from those around him that they were utterly horrified by his narrative. But he needed to tell them, he needed to get it all out, like one would let blood to release a toxin. "I know that my powers are greater than his, and he knows it too. I've known it for a few years. That was part of the reason Dooku left; he started to fear me, and he knew that it was only a matter of time before Sidious replaced him with me. And the Sith don't just hand you your walking papers, they kill you when you are no longer of use to them. As it turned out, Dooku was the lucky one. He got away, he escaped from the monster."

"If you knew that you were stronger than him, why didn't you just refuse to take orders from him?" Cliegg asked at this point.

"A slave doesn't question the orders of his master," Vader replied, "no matter how much he questions them, no matter how much he hates his master. I learned that from a very young

age. I went from one form of slavery to another, and have never known anything else.”

“But now that you know what he did, you will refuse,” Padmé said. “Now that the truth has been revealed, you must stand up to him, Anakin. Your servitude to this monster has to end.”

Vader looked at her. “Yes, I know,” he replied. “But as you pointed out, Padmé, one does not just kill the Chancellor of the Republic.”

“Can’t the Jedi help you?” Shmi suggested. “Surely when they learn of this man’s true nature they will be as anxious to see his end as you are.”

Vader didn’t reply, for the thought of going to the Jedi was not one he relished. He was a Sith too, after all; if they sought to destroy Sidious, wouldn’t they not also be anxious to destroy his apprentice?

“I don’t know if they will help me,” Vader said at last. “I’ve been deceiving them along with Sidious. Why would they help me now? They have no reason to trust me. No one does, for that matter,” he added, looking down once again.

Padmé knew that this remark was directed at her, and she squeezed his hand. “There are many who do, though,” she told him. “And many who will help you take Palpatine down. You’re not in this alone, Anakin.”

Vader looked at his wife, her trust and her faith in him shocking him. He couldn’t begin to understand how she was capable of feeling this way. It had been so long since anyone had shown him forgiveness, or compassion, that he hardly knew how to react to the gift of them.

Shmi watched the exchange between her son and his wife, seeing something there that they themselves hadn’t seen yet, and it gave her hope.

“How is it that you were able to get married, Anakin?” Cliegg asked. “It sounds as though marriage would have been forbidden by the Sith.”

“Well that’s a story in itself,” Vader replied. ‘I married Padmé only out of revenge,’ he explained. “To spite someone. I promised Sidious that I would control her, that I would break her spirit. That’s the only reason he allowed me to marry her.”

Padmé did not know this, but it didn’t surprise her. She looked down at her hand entwined with his, knowing that, despite his words, there was far more to their marriage now than either of them had anticipated.

“Of course, he stipulated that there could be no physical manifestation of our marriage,” Vader added, looking at his wife’s hand in his own. “It was to be a marriage in name only, a means of controlling someone who Sidious considered a dangerous enemy.”

“But there is clearly more between the two of you than that,” Shmi pointed out. “I’ve only seen you together for an hour and I can see how much you love one another.”

Vader and Padmé looked at one another, surprised by Shmi’s comment.

“It has turned out quite differently than either of us anticipated,” Padmé spoke up. “But that places us both in danger, I’m afraid.”

“Danger from Palpatine?” Cliegg asked.

“Yes,” Vader replied, looking at his step father. “He told me that if he so much as suspected that there was a physical relationship between Padmé and I that he would kill her, and I’m sure he’d do the same to me as well.”

Vader’s statement rendered everyone silent for a moment as they tried to come to terms with such evil.

“Then he must never know,” Shmi said simply.

Vader looked at her and nodded. “You’re right,” he said. He looked at Padmé. “I won’t let him harm my wife,” he said.

Padmé smiled at him. She finally understood. He had lived without any positive emotion in his life for so long that he did not know how to express it. The fact that he had shown her such tenderness was all the more astounding considering how devoid of affection his life had been for the past fifteen years. No doubt his formative years with his mother must have been remarkable, and had made a profound impression on him.

“I know you won’t,” Shmi said, taking hope from her son’s devotion to his wife. If he was still capable of loving, then there was hope for him after all.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

“Well I don’t know about you good people but I’m tired,” Cliegg said. “We’re up pretty early out here on the farm,” he added with a smile.

“I’m sure you are,” Padmé replied with a smile. She looked at Vader. “Maybe we ought to get back to town to look for accommodations.”

“You’ll do no such thing!” Shmi said, standing up. “You will stay right here with us tonight.”

“We don’t want to put you out, Mom,” Vader said.

“Anakin, you and Padmé are family,” she said. “Besides, we have a spare room. I had Cliegg build it beside the garage in the hopes that it would be yours one day when you came home to me,” she added with a wistful smile.

Vader smiled. “Well, I’ve come home, Mom,” he said, standing up. He walked around the table to his mother and embraced her tightly. “I’ve missed you so much,” he told her.

Shmi hugged him back, too emotional to say anything in response.

“Come on,” she said when Vader finally released her. “I’ll show you to your room.”

Shmi lead Vader and Padmé down a short corridor to the garage and beyond the garage to a small room.

“It isn’t very big I’m afraid,” she told them as she opened the door. “But it’s better than going all the way to town. Besides, it’s not safe to go outside once it’s dark with all the sand people around.”

“It’s fine, Mom,” Vader said, kissing her cheek. “We’ll be perfectly comfortable here, I promise you.”

“Good,” Shmi replied. “Good night to you both.”

“Goodnight,” Padmé replied. “And thank you.”

Shmi turned and looked at her daughter in law. “Thank *you*, Padmé,” she said softly. And then she turned and left them alone, closing the door behind her.

Vader looked around the room, seeing the few things he owned as a boy placed neatly on a shelf on one side of the room. He walked over to it, looking at the items, a feeling of melancholy filling him as he did so. Padmé watched him, and then walked over to him.

“Your things?” she asked simply.

Vader nodded. “What few I had,” he replied, picking up a small model of a speeder. ‘We didn’t have much,’ he added, “but we were always so happy, Mom and I. We had each other.”

Padmé took his hand, her heart aching for him.

“He stole my childhood from me, Padmé,” he told her, setting the toy down carefully. ‘I will never get that back.’ He turned to her. “How do I get over that? How do I live knowing that the past fifteen years of my life have been a lie?”

“You move on,” she told him. “You live for the present, for the future. And you let those around you help you do that.”

He shook his head in wonder at her statement. “How can you even care about me, Padmé?” he asked. “After everything I’ve done, after the way I’ve acted, the way I forced you to marry me... I’ve done nothing to deserve your compassion and everything to earn your resentment. How can you stand there and tell me you want to help me now? I don’t deserve your help or your compassion; I don’t deserve you at all.”

“Anakin, listen to me,” she said, taking his face in her hands. “If I didn’t think you were deserving of compassion I wouldn’t be here right now. I know our relationship hasn’t exactly been conventional, and yes, in the beginning I did resent you. But I’ve seen past the façade you put on for the public, I’ve seen the boy who cherished these toys, who loved to race and build things. I’ve seen the Anakin Skywalker inside of Darth Vader, that’s how I know you’re worthy. That’s the man I’ve fallen in love with.”

Her words shocked Vader and for a moment he was speechless. “You... you love me?” he asked at last.

Padmé nodded, her hands gently stroking his face. “Does that surprise you?”

“Yes!” he replied, ‘it... it blows me away! I never dreamed in a thousand years I could have the love of someone like you,’ he said, taking her face in his hands. “An angel,” he added, pulling her closer. “My angel,” he whispered as he kissed her brow. “I think I’ve loved you since I saw you at the Gathering on Alderaan,” he told her, pressing his forehead to hers, “only I didn’t know what it was I felt. I haven’t loved anyone in so long I didn’t even know,” he told her, closing his eyes against the tears that rose in them.

“You’ll never be unloved again,” she told him softly. “I promise. I will love you for the rest of my life, Anakin.”

Vader opened his eyes and looked at her. “You *are* an angel,” he told her softly, and then pulled her close, bringing his mouth to hers. Padmé ran her hands into his hair, his kiss making her grow weak in the knees. He brought his hands up the sides of her body as his mouth found the side of her neck. “Come over here,” he whispered into her ear as he took her hand. He led her to the bed where he sat down and pulled her close again.

“You take my breath away,” he told her, taking her by the wrists and then running his hands up the length of her arms. Padmé looked down into his eyes for a moment and then reached down and pulled the white tunic she was wearing off over her head. Vader watched her, and then brought his hands to her waist, pulling her close once more. Padmé closed her eyes as he kissed the base of her throat. “Yes, Anakin,” she sighed, having already decided that she was never going to use his Sith name again.

Vader looked up at her, loving the way her body was responding to his touch. Padmé reached for him and pushed at his cloak. “I want to touch you,” she told him, bringing her

mouth to his ear and nibbling on his earlobe.

Vader was more than willing to comply. He pulled his tunic off over his head and tossed it on the floor, reaching out for Padmé once more as she ran her hands over his shoulders, her mouth finding his as he pulled her close to him.

"I've never touched a woman this way," he whispered against her ear, sending shivers down her spine. "I've never wanted a woman this way," he told her, running his hands up the sides of her body.

"You were right about Palo," she told him. "I never loved him, I never wanted him. It's like I've been waiting for you all my life, and didn't know it."

"That's exactly how I feel," he told her. "You're in my very soul, Padmé."

Padmé smiled, and wrapped her arms around his neck as he picked her up and brought her to the small bed....

A while later...

Vader looked down at Padmé, nestled in his arms, and kissed her softly. "I love you," he told her, brushing the stray tendrils of hair from her brow.

Padmé reached up and stroked his face. "I love you," she replied. "We're going to have to be very careful," she told him.

Vader nodded. "I know," he said. "I won't let him hurt you, Padmé," he told her. "I promise you."

"It's not just me I'm worried about," she said. "You're in as much danger as I am, Anakin."

"Don't worry about me," he told her, tracing a finger over her bare shoulder. "He doesn't stand a chance against me, Angel," he told her. "I promise you."

Padmé nodded, trusting that he knew what he was talking about.

"Let's not worry about him," he told her, kissing the top of her head. "Not now, not tonight. This is a special night, Padmé. I don't want Palpatine to interfere in that."

Padmé smiled, and snuggled closer to him. "You're right," she said. "Tonight let's just pretend Palpatine doesn't exist," she suggested.

Vader nodded and rested his face against the silken top of her head. "I can do that," he told her sleepily.

Padmé closed her eyes, feeling complete in her husband's loving, strong embrace. "Good night, Ani," she said.

Vader smiled at her use of his nickname. "Goodnight Angel."

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Is it night? Or is it day? Curled up in the corner of the dark room, Anakin tried hard not to be scared. He pictured his mother, and thoughts of her helped him. She'll come for me, she made a mistake... this has all been a big mistake. Very soon the door will open and my mom will be there and take me home... how many times had he tried to convince himself that this was the case? And yet every day he was disappointed, heart broken when she didn't come. No, it wasn't his mother who eventually came to the door, it was the man who had taken him away in the first place. His name was Count Dooku, Anakin had learned on the ship. And as terrifying as he was, he was far less scary than the man Dooku called Master. The sight of the yellow eyes had been terrifying to behold, and the young boy had screamed the first time he'd seen Lord Sidious. But he soon learned not to do that again. Anakin closed his eyes, the tears that he'd thought long dried up filling them again. He had never felt so alone, so sad and so afraid.

Padmé was awoken a few hours later by the thrashing about of her mate. She reached out and took Vader by the shoulder, shaking him gently.

"Anakin, wake up," she said, lying an arm over his chest and shaking him again.

Vader awoke with a start, and looked around in the dark room, not sure if he was still dreaming or not. And then he felt the warmth of his wife's body next to him, her loving, soothing presence. And at once he knew he was safe.

"You were having a nightmare," she told him, reaching up to gently caress his face.

Vader nodded, the images of his dream still fresh in his mind. "I was alone, in that room where Sidious used to lock me up," he told her. "I spent more hours there than I like to consider," he told her quietly.

Padmé's heart ached for him and she wrapped her arms around him, putting her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she told him.

Vader turned to her and pulled her close, taking comfort in her presence. He closed his eyes, burying his face in her thick hair, the scent of it surrounding him. "What would I do without you?" he asked her softly.

"You'll never need to worry about that, Ani," she told him. "I promise you."

Vader nodded, pulling her closer and kissing the side of her neck. "I was like a drowning man, and you're my life line," he told her.

Padmé closed her eyes, his words moving her deeply. How different he was now then when she'd first met him. He was so cold, so cruel, so sardonic, and seemingly cared for nothing and no one. Now she knew that he simply did not know how else to act. He had been raised by a monster who knew nothing of love or compassion, who thrived on hate and cruelty. Was it any wonder Vader had acted the way he had?

"I never imagined things would turn out this way when you cornered me at the Gathering," she told him, running her fingers through his hair. "Do you remember that conversation?"

"Of course," he replied, still nuzzling her neck. "I followed you out there, you know," he told her.

Padmé was surprised. "Really?" she asked. "Why?"

"Curiosity mostly," he told her. "Maybe part of me knew you were my destiny."

"Well you didn't act like it," she told him. "You were pretty cold as I recall."

"I was," he agreed. 'I had no idea how to talk to such a beautiful woman,' he admitted. "So I tried to impress you by being as nasty as I possibly could be."

"I wasn't impressed," she told him.

Vader pulled back and looked at her. "I could tell," he replied with a smile. "You made me work pretty hard to impress you in those early days. I really had no clue what to do to catch your attention."

"Just being yourself did the trick," she told him. "Admitting that you're human, and vulnerable. Although when you saved me from Palo, that got my attention."

"I wanted very much to kill him for what he did to you," Vader told her. "I'd still like to. If you hadn't intervened, he would have died, no question."

"I know," she replied, not wanting to dwell on that terrible event, not wanting Vader to get angry about it all over again. 'Of course,' she said, winding her fingers into his hair, "seeing you naked didn't hurt either," she teased.

Vader laughed. "Yes, nudity definitely has a way of lowering one's defenses," he told her.

"Absolutely," she agreed with a smile, nuzzling her nose along his neck.

Vader closed his eyes, losing himself to the sensations she was creating within him. "Senator Amidala, I had no idea you were so insatiable," he told her as he ran his hands down the sides of her body.

"Neither did I," she replied, nibbling on his earlobe. "I've never been remotely interested in this sort of intimacy before I met you," she told him.

"And now?" he asked. "Interested?"

Padmé laughed. "Can't you tell?" she asked him.

Vader smiled. "Yes, I believe I can," he told her, rolling her onto her back...

A while later...

Vader dropped his head onto the pillow beside her, breathing hard, their bodies still entwined.

"You're an amazing lover," she told him softly into his ear. "I love you so much."

Vader lifted his head and looked at her. "I love you," he told her, kissing the tip of her nose. "I can't get enough of you," he told her.

Padmé smiled, taking his face in her hands. “I know what you mean,” she replied.

Vader kissed her once more, and then rolled beside her, his arms wrapping around her. “I wonder what time it is,” he said with a yawn.

“I imagine they get up pretty early here,” she commented, snuggling up to him.

“Probably,” he replied sleepily. “In that case, I’m not sure I’d make a very good farmer,” he added with a smile.

Padmé giggled. “Not if you don’t sleep all night,” she told him.

“Well that’s your fault, Senator,” he told her, kissing her shoulder.

“My fault?”

“Yes, completely,” he replied. “I can’t resist your charms, my love.”

Padmé smiled. “Well, I guess that’s a good thing,” she decided.

Vader laughed. “It’s a very good thing,” he told her, kissing her shoulder again. He was silent for a moment as a thought came to him. ‘You know, if you hadn’t suggested we come to Tatooine, I never would have known the truth,’ he told her. “I would have spent the rest of my life believing the lies that bastard told me.”

Padmé nodded. “And now that you do know, you know what you have to do.”

“Palpatine and Dooku must die,” he replied simply.

Padmé hesitated for a moment before saying anything. “Yes, I know you feel compelled to do that,” she acknowledged. “But the ramifications are more far reaching than their deaths, Anakin. You must abandon the Dark Side. You have to stop living as Darth Vader and become Anakin Skywalker again.”

Vader was silent for a moment. “I know,” he said at last, running a finger down her bare arm. ‘I’m not sure I know how to be him again, though,’ he admitted. “I haven’t been him in a very long time, Padmé.”

“Yes, I realize that,” she replied. ‘But you’ve already begun your metamorphosis,’ she told him. “Do the Sith love? Are they even capable of it?”

Vader frowned. “No,” he said at once. “The Sith have nothing but contempt for love, or compassion, or any emotion that isn’t rooted in darkness.”

“So the fact that you love me means that you have already begun to abandon the Dark Side,” she told him. “Palpatine obviously didn’t expect that you’d fall in love with me when he agreed to let you marry me.”

“He has no knowledge of love, no concept of it at all,” Vader told her. “And yet he forbade me from having a physical relationship with you,” he mused.

“No doubt he sees physical desire as a weakness,” she commented. “Perhaps he was afraid you’d be weakened by it, and the darkness in you would be compromised.”

“Physical pleasure of any kind is strictly forbidden by him,” he told her. “Suffering and pain, that is the way of the Sith. They make you strong.”

“Is that why you were abused so much?” she asked. “To strengthen you?”

“Yes,” he told her. “In his twisted mind it was the best way to ensure I was immersed in the Darkness. As it turned out, it worked.”

Padmé frowned, hatred for Palpatine filling her. “Perhaps to a point,” she replied. “But he didn’t realize that there was still enough Anakin Skywalker left in you to hold on to, even through all the abuse.”

“No, I don’t suppose he did,” Vader agreed. ‘But you mustn’t use that name, Padmé,’ he told her. “Until I have dealt with both Palpatine and Dooku, I must remain Darth Vader, at least in name.”

“I know,” she replied. “But when we’re alone, when we’re in bed together like this, I can’t call you Vader. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that about you,” he teased. “I’ve heard that name called out many times recently.”

Padmé felt her face grow warm. “You didn’t seem to mind,” she pointed out.

“Mind?” he replied, pulling her close again. ‘My extraordinarily beautiful wife calls out my name while I’m making love to her,’ he said, nuzzling the side of her neck. “Why would I mind?” he asked, bringing his mouth to hers once more.

Chapter 24

A.N. I want to extend my sincere appreciation to all my loyal readers who have been so supportive of my work. It isn't easy when someone attacks you personally, under the guise of a critical review. However I am determined not to let one misguided soul destroy my enthusiasm for writing or my dedication to you, my faithful readers. Thank you for your amazing words of support and encouragement. They mean more to me than you know.

Chapter 24

Padmé woke up as bright morning sunshine blasted its way through the round window on the ceiling of the room. She turned to see if her husband was awake and smiled when she saw him. He had his face buried under a pillow and was snoring softly. Deciding to let him sleep, she got up and got dressed.

Shmi and Beru were in the kitchen when Padmé arrived in the eating area. She wondered whether the men were, and reasoned that they were probably already out working the farm.

"Good morning," Padmé said, walking into the kitchen.

Shmi and Beru looked up. "Oh, good morning Padmé," Shmi responded with a smile. "I hope you slept well."

"Yes, very well thank you," Padmé replied.

"Are you hungry?" Beru asked. "We have fresh baked muffins."

"Yes, I am actually," she replied.

"Is Anakin still sleeping?" Shmi asked as they returned to the table.

"Yes," Padmé replied. "I didn't want to wake him."

Shmi nodded as the three women sat down at the table. "I can't believe what he's been through," she said with a frown. "Why did they do this to him, Padmé?" she asked. "Why did they take him from me?"

Padmé sighed. "Anakin has very unusual gifts," she told her. "He is very powerful. Surely you must have noticed that."

"Of course," Shmi told her. "He was always that way. He could always anticipate things happening before they did, and was always very aware of the feelings of others. But perhaps most remarkable of all was the fact that there was no father; I simply became pregnant with him one day. I can't explain it any better than that."

"Somehow Palpatine must have known about him," Padmé suggested. "He must have realized the sort of power that Anakin would have some day and wanted it for himself."

"And the only way to do that was to enslave Anakin," Shmi added. She shook her head sadly. "My poor Ani," she said. "He's been through so much. But now that you're in his life, there's hope that he can start his life anew."

“That is my hope,” Padmé replied. “But it won’t be easy. He has spent the past fifteen years living according to the way of the Sith. He doesn’t know anything else.”

“Then you’ll just have to teach him,” Shmi said with a smile.

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she replied. ‘I only hope I can do it,’ she added. “Palpatine’s influence is very strong, and he hasn’t known any other way of life for so long. It will be a long road for him, but I won’t let him go through it alone.”

Shmi smiled. “I’m so grateful that you two found one another,” she told Padmé.

“Good morning.”

The women looked up to see Vader standing in the doorway. He walked over and kissed his mother on the cheek, and then went to sit beside Padmé. “Why didn’t you wake me up?” he asked her, leaning over and kissing her.

“You seemed to need your rest,” she told him.

“Good you’re both up,” Cliegg said as he entered the room with his son.

Padmé and Vader looked up at him. “Something going on?” Vader asked him.

“I’m afraid so,” Cliegg replied. “Owen here was just in town, and there are a lot of people asking questions about Watto’s death.”

Vader turned and looked at Padmé. “That was bound to happen I suppose,” he remarked.

“They’re starting an investigation, Anakin,” Owen said. “And I heard at least one person say they saw a man matching your description enter Watto’s shop.”

Padmé grew alarmed. “I think we’d better leave,” she said finally. “If they find you...” she stopped, not wanting to think what would happen if they did.

“You think they’d stand a chance of arresting me?” Vader asked her with a smirk. “They wouldn’t stand a chance, Padmé. I promise you.”

This did not make Padmé feel any better, and she looked over at Shmi who looked equally upset.

“Padmé is right,” Shmi said sadly. “As much as I hate to see you go, I think for your own sake, as well as Padmé’s, it would be wise to do so.”

Vader looked at his mother, not wanting to debate the point with her. “We’ve been apart for fifteen years,” he told her. “I don’t want to say goodbye to you so soon, Mom.”

Shmi didn’t say anything, but looked at Padmé, and then back at him. “Neither do I, Ani,” she said. “But at the same time, I don’t want to see you dragged into prison which is what would happen if you stay.”

“They may find me, but I can promise you they would not stand a chance of apprehending me,” Vader assured her.

Vader’s comment was followed by an awkward silence. No one wanted to be the one to point out that at this moment Vader was sounding very much like a Sith.

“Ani, please,” Padmé said finally, putting a hand on his. “It’s best if we leave and avoid any confrontations, don’t you think?”

Vader looked at her, not quite understanding why she doubted his ability to get them out of trouble. “Very well,” he said at last. “If you insist.”

Shmi was relieved that Padmé was able to make him see reason. As much as she hated so see him leave, she hated the thought of him committing more acts of violence more.

Vader and Padmé stood up from the table, neither saying anything for a moment.

“I want you to come to Coruscant, Mom,” Vader said to his mother. “When this is all settled and it’s safe to do so.”

“We’d love to come,” Shmi said.

“When the harvest is over, of course,” Cliegg put in for good measure.

Vader looked at him and nodded. “Of course,” he replied. He looked back at his mother. “You’ll have to come if you want to see your grandchildren,” he told her with a smile.

Shmi smiled. “I would love that,” she told him. She walked over to her son and put her arms around him. ‘Good bye Ani,’ she said, trying hard not to cry. “I’m so glad we found one another again.”

Vader embraced her tightly. “We’ll see one another soon, Mom,” he told her. “I promise you.”

Shmi nodded. “I know we will.”

Having said their hasty goodbyes, Vader and Padmé returned to their ship in silence. They had almost reached it when a speeder appeared, and it was approaching fast.

“Ani, look!” Padmé said, pointing in the direction of the oncoming speeder.

“I see them,” Vader replied, his eyes fixed on the vehicle. “Get into the ship. I’ll take care of this.”

“Anakin, please,” she said.

“Do it!” he told her, releasing her hand. “Run!”

Padmé ran to the ship as Vader remained to face the oncoming speeder alone. She didn’t want to think about what he would do should the occupants of the speeder turn out to be the local authorities.

Vader focused on the speeder, his mind focusing on the intent of the occupants. It wasn’t hard to read their thoughts, for they were simple beings with minds that were easily read. *Cliegg Lars’ wife was seen with this man shortly after the murder... she may know his whereabouts...* Vader frowned, deciding he could not allow this person to continue.

Padmé watched through the view screen of the ship as the speeder came to a sudden halt. She held her breath as she waited to see what would happen next, and then cringed when she saw it explode into a fire ball. Although she couldn’t hear the screams of the driver, she knew

that he'd died in the explosion. Padmé covered her face with her hands as she sat down. *Oh Ani, did you need to kill him? Why couldn't you just have come on board and left him alone?*

"Let's go," Vader said as he entered the cockpit. He sat down and looked at his wife. "What's wrong?"

She looked up at him, amazed that he'd even ask the question. "Why did you kill him?" she asked.

Vader frowned. "My mother's safety was at stake," he told her as he started the ignition sequence. "What else could I have done?"

Padmé couldn't answer and looked away.

"I thought you were going to change," she told him finally as he lifted the ship off the ground.

Vader looked at her. "I am," he told her. "But it's not going to happen overnight, Padmé. You have to understand that."

Padmé nodded. "I do," she replied quietly. "It's just...hard to see you kill."

Vader sighed. "Sometimes there simply are no alternatives, Senator," he told her.

Padmé looked away again. *I hate it when he calls me that*, she thought in frustration.

Vader heard her thought and simply returned his attention to making the calculations for the jump to light speed.

"I thought you said you didn't want to have children," Padmé said after a few moments of silence between them.

Vader turned to her, happy that she had decided to talk to him again. "When did I say that?"

"When we were planning the wedding," she told him. "Remember? The baby was crying and we got talking about babies, and he asked us if we were planning on having children. You said no."

Vader nodded. "Ah yes, I remember now," he told her. "I only said that because I never thought we'd become sexually involved."

"You mean you do want children?" she asked hopefully.

"Some day," he replied. "Yes. But so long as Palpatine lives we don't dare even think of it."

"No, of course not," she agreed. "I wouldn't dream of having a baby until this nightmare is behind us," she told him.

Vader knew exactly what she meant. "You mean you won't have my child so long as I'm Darth Vader," he said. "Is that what you mean?"

Padmé looked at him, deciding there was no point in sugar coating the truth. "Yes," she replied. "I hope you can understand that."

Vader could understand, but it still hurt. "I do," he replied quietly. "I suppose that will just be more motivation for me to change," he added.

Padmé smiled. "Oh I think I can find a few ways to motivate you," she told him.

Vader smiled. "There is one thing though, that I'm not sure you understand," he said. "I... I don't really know any other way to live. Imagine if someone told you that you had to change everything about yourself. How could you do it? I've had no role models, no teachers but those monsters that stole me from my mother. The only way I know is Darkness, Padmé. I know there is light inside of me, but how do I use that light to eradicate the darkness?"

Padmé sighed. He was absolutely right; how does one change one's spots without someone to show them the way? Her help would only go so far; she knew nothing of the kind of powers he possessed. And then she had an idea.

"I know someone who can help you," she said at last. "That is, if you are willing to trust him."

"Help me? How?" Vader asked. "Who is it?"

"Someone who can help you to use your abilities in a way not dependent on Darkness, someone who can show you the path to the light."

"Are you talking about the Jedi?" he asked with a frown. "I told you that they won't trust me, Padmé."

"Not all of them," she agreed. "No. But there is one who I believe will. He is open minded and wise enough to listen to your story and give you the guidance you need. I've known him a long time, and I trust him implicitly. Perhaps you know him. His name is Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Yes, I know him," Vader replied. "He's one of the few Jedi I actually respect," he added.

"Good," she responded, relieved to hear it. "Then you'll talk to him? You'll tell him your story?"

Vader didn't reply at first, for the thought of revealing his identity as a Sith to a Jedi was rather unnerving. Still, he knew he had to start somewhere, and he had to trust someone. He looked at Padmé, who was watching him closely, an expression of hopefulness on her face. How could he say no when it meant so much to her and to their future together?

"Yes," he said at last. "I will speak to Kenobi. I only hope your trust in him isn't unfounded, Padmé."

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Vader and Padmé were both exhausted by the time they reached Bellassa. It had been an emotional forty-eight hours, and both were drained emotionally and physically. Without even discussing plans, they simply headed for the bed upon reaching their hotel room. After getting undressed, they both collapsed into bed, both falling asleep within minutes. They spent most of the afternoon asleep, and when they awoke, it was almost evening.

Vader awoke alone, and then heard the sound of the shower in the fresher next door. He thought briefly of joining his wife, but was soon overcome with powerful hunger pangs that quickly negated any amorous feelings he may have had. Getting out of bed, he walked into the fresher where Padmé was just turning off the water.

"I'm as hungry as a wookiee," he told her as she wrapped a towel around her hair.

"Me too," she said. "I was going to suggest we go out, but I'm not sure I can last," she told him with a smile.

"I know I can't," he told her. "Why don't we eat in and go out afterwards? Maybe there's a concert we could attend."

"Good idea," she said.

"You go ahead and order while I get cleaned up," he said, starting to disrobe.

"Alright," she said, giving him a quick kiss. "Is there anything you fancy?"

"Nope," he said. "I'm easy to please."

She smiled to herself at his unintentional double entendre, and walked over to the comm. to order dinner for them.

"So how do you know Kenobi?" Vader asked as they ate their dinner a little while later.

"He was one of the two Jedi who rescued me when the Trade Federation set up a blockade around Naboo ten years ago," she told him. "Obi-Wan was a padawan at the time. He and his master, Qui-Gon Jinn, got me and my entourage off of Naboo and to safety. They were also instrumental in the battle that took place on Naboo a short time after that."

"I've never heard of Qui-Gon Jinn," Vader told her.

"He died during the battle," she told him. "Killed by a very strange, savage looking creature. I'll never forget the sight of him."

Vader frowned. "What did it look like?"

"He had a red and black face," she told him as she remembered, "and his head was encircled with horns. His eyes were yellow... he was terrifying. He killed Qui-Gon, and then Obi-Wan killed him."

Vader thought about this for a moment. “Sounds like a Sith,” he told her. “It was probably Darth Maul, Palpatine’s apprentice before Dooku. I’ve heard him mention him now and then. I didn’t realize that he was killed by a Jedi.”

“Well he was,” Padmé told him. “And a padawan at that.”

“I’m impressed,” he told her. He sat back in the chair. “I feel better now,” he said.

Padmé smiled at him. “You inhaled your dinner,” she said. “Did you taste any of it?” she teased.

Vader grinned. “Some of it,” he said.

Padmé laughed. “So what shall we do this evening?” she asked. “Besides that,” she added when she saw his grin growing bigger.

“Well, we could take in a show,” he replied.

She nodded. “What about dancing?” she asked.

“I suppose we could do that,” he replied. “If you really want to.”

“Such enthusiasm,” she said, standing up. ‘Think of it this way, you can touch me and hold me close all evening in public,’ she told him. “Does that make it any more appealing?”

“Yes, definitely,” he replied. “Only if you get me too excited I won’t be held responsible for my actions,” he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled, his words exciting her. “I’ll do my best not to,” she promised.

Vader stood up. “I’ll believe that when I see it,” he replied.

Padmé just laughed.

The night club was rather crowded when Vader and Padmé arrived a short time later. He was having a difficult time keeping his hands to himself, for Padmé looked very enticing in her short, sleeveless dress. The fabric hugged every curve, leaving little to his imagination.

“Dance, Senator?” he asked, taking her hand.

“That’s what we’re here for,” she replied with a smile as he led her to the dance floor. The band was playing a lively tune when they got there, but that didn’t stop Vader from pulling Padmé into his arms.

“This is a fast number,” she told him.

“So?” he replied. ‘You promised that I could hold you close all evening,’ he told her. “I’m holding you to that promise, Senator.”

She smiled, running her hands up his chest and resting them on his shoulders.

“You’re making it difficult for me to keep my promise holding me close this way,” she told him as she felt his hands run down her back.

Vader smiled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Senator,” he said. “All I’m doing is dancing with my wife.”

Padmé laughed. “Yes, that’s all you’re doing,” she said.

Vader’s smile grew. “So suspicious, my love,” he told her, bending to her and kissing her.

Padmé wrapped her arms around his neck, realizing that keeping their hands off of each other was next to impossible.

“We should never have left our hotel room,” she told him as his mouth moved down to her neck.

Vader stopped what he was doing and looked at her. “No, you wanted to go dancing,” he told her. “So, we’re dancing.”

She shook her head at him. “Is that what we’re doing?” she asked.

“Of course,” he told her. “Why, what do you think we’re doing?”

“I think the term is foreplay,” she told him.

Vader looked down at her, her comment surprising him. “No, we’d both be wearing far less clothing if that were the case,” he told her, bringing his mouth to her ear. “And I’d be covering your perfect, soft skin in kisses.”

Padmé closed her eyes; his words making her grow weak in the knees. “Ani, don’t,” she said.

“I’m not doing anything,” he protested. “I’m not actually doing those things, just telling you about them. Is there something wrong with that?”

“You know very well there is,” she replied.

“What is wrong with that? Explain it to me,” he said.

Padmé felt her face grow warm, the thought of describing how his words were making her feel embarrassing her. “No,” she replied.

Vader raised his eyebrows. “No?” he said. “Why ever not, Senator?”

She looked up at him. “Because it makes me feel uncomfortable,” she told him, giving him her best senatorial face, or at least trying to.

“I wonder why that is,” he teased, enjoying her discomfort immensely.

Padmé said nothing in response, which Vader only took as a challenge. “I mean, it’s not like you didn’t enjoy it last night,” he whispered into her ear. “Do you remember? I was..” he stopped when she put a finger over his lips.

“Don’t say another word,” she told him.

He didn’t, but took her finger that was covering his lips and kissed the tip of it. And then he kissed the palm of her hand, and then her wrist. Padmé felt any sense of self restraint evaporating as she looked into his eyes, his mouth continuing to kiss along the length of her arm.

“You are so bad,” she whispered to him, her voice breathless with her own excitement.

Vader said nothing, but kept his eyes riveted to hers as he returned her hand to his shoulder. "That's not what you told me last night," he said at last with a smug smile.

Padmé narrowed her eyes, deciding that she'd let him get away with far too much. It was time to fight fire with fire.

"Well, you're a wonderful lover," she told him, deciding to get even.

His smile only broadened at this praise.

"In fact, I haven't been able to stop thinking about last night," she told him. "Or this morning. It was all I could do not to get into the shower with you earlier."

Vader looked at her, knowing that she was trying to get to him. "Why didn't you?" he asked simply.

She shrugged. "You were hungry," she replied. 'But when I was getting dressed I just couldn't get the image of your naked body out of my mind,' she told him. He simply smiled in response. "In fact," she said, motioning for him to bend down so she could whisper in his ear, which he did at once. "In fact, I was so distracted by it that I completely forgot about undergarments. Can you believe it?"

Vader moved so that he was looking at her. "You... you're not wearing any undergarments?" he asked, all trace of a smile gone from his face.

Padmé shook her head. "No," she told him. "It's just me under this dress," she told him with a smile.

Vader swallowed hard, the mental image she had just painted him going straight from his brain to his groin. "Touché, Senator," he said with a smile. "I always said you had a ruthless streak to you."

Padmé's smile grew. "You don't believe me, do you?" she said.

"I know you well enough to know that you'd never do anything so daring," he told her.

"I guess you don't know me as well as you think, Lord Vader," she responded.

Vader looked at her, truly at a loss to know if she was telling him the truth or not. But his ability to reason was far too compromised by the heat in his veins that he didn't even try to guess. "You know there as a way to prove your bold statement," he said at last, upping the ante.

"Yes, I'm sure there is," she replied. "But we're in public, and the last thing you want is to make a scene," she reminded him.

Vader frowned; frustrated that she'd thought one step ahead of him. "I didn't say anything about doing anything here," he told her.

"No?" she asked. "You could have fooled me," she said with a smile, walking away from him as the music ended.

Vader stood in the middle of the dance floor, watching her walk away. And then he ran to catch up to her as she seated herself in a nearby booth.

"You're playing a dangerous game, Senator," Vader told her as he slid into the booth beside her.

"Am I?" she asked nonchalantly.

"Oh yes," he replied, moving closer. 'Playing with fire is what you're doing,' he told her, brushing his lips over her temple. "Doesn't that frighten you?"

Padmé looked up at him. "Not at all," she said. "I don't frighten easily. I'm married to Darth Vader, remember?"

Vader smiled. He looked at her, the image of her being naked under her dress still filling his mind. "Are you really wearing nothing under that dress?" he asked, running a finger down the side of her face.

Padmé laughed, loving the fact that she had him truly rattled. "Maybe," she said.

And then she felt his hand on her thigh, moving upward without hesitation.

"Anakin!" she admonished, pushing his hand away. "We're in public!"

"No one can see," he told her, his hand unrelenting, "it's dark, we're behind a table."

"I know, but..."

"I thought you said you didn't frighten easily," he challenged her.

She looked at him, his single mindedness starting to annoy her.

"Ani, please," she said, wanting him to stop but not wanting him to stop.

"Please what?" he whispered into her ear as he nibbled on her earlobe. "Please stop? Or please don't stop?"

She closed her eyes, fighting to keep control of herself. "Please don't tease me this way," she said at last.

"I'm teasing you?" he asked. "I'm not the one who forgot to put underwear on," he told her.

She knew she'd been bested, but he wasn't playing fair. "I want to leave now," she told him, pushing his hand away firmly. "Now."

Vader looked at her with a frown. "Are you angry with me?" he asked, moving away.

She made no reply, and he knew by her silence that she was. He sighed loudly, frustrated with the way things were working out.

"Let's go," he said, standing up.

Padmé looked up at him, seeing that he was annoyed with her. What had started off as harmless flirting had somehow escalated into a tension filled situation and hurt feelings. She slid off the bench and stood up. Vader walked away without looking back. She followed him out of the club and to the lift. There was no one inside of it, and it gave her an idea.

"You're not angry with me, are you?" she asked him as soon as the doors closed.

“Why would I be?” he asked, not looking at her.

She watched him for a moment. “I’m not sure,” she replied.

He turned and looked at her. “Teasing a man to distraction and then asking him to stop cold is rather cruel, don’t you think?” he asked.

“I suppose it would be,” she said, walking over and activating the lift’s brake. At once the lift came to a halt. Vader looked over at her.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked.

She looked up and around the ceiling of the lift for a security holocamera. “Apologizing,” she replied, walking over to him. He watched her warily as she came to stand right in front of him, and looked up at him with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

“You don’t need to,” he told her.

“Oh but I do,” she insisted, running her hands over his chest. She smiled when she discovered that despite his irritation he was still more than a little turned on. He watched her, feeling himself growing more excited with each caress of her hands. Glancing up at the camera, he used the Force to discontinue its power source, and then looked back at her.

“You *do* like to play with fire, don’t you Senator?” he growled, moving suddenly and backing her up against the wall of the lift.

“Yes,” she said. “You’re not the only one who likes to live dangerously, Lord Vader,” she whispered against his ear as he pressed his body to hers, his mouth ravaging her neck with hot kisses.

“You know what happens when you play with fire,” he told her as he looked down into her eyes.

“No, why don’t you tell me,” she challenged.

“I’d rather show you,” he replied...

A short time later...

“Am I forgiven?” she asked, kissing his forehead as he lifted her to the floor of the lift.

He could only nod, bracing one hand against the wall as he caught his breath.

Padmé smiled, and helped him arrange his clothing so that they could resume the lift. Vader stood behind her, his arms wrapped around her lovingly as she activated the lift once more. “I love you, Senator,” he whispered against her ear.

Padmé’s smile grew. “I know,” she said, as the lift reached their floor and stopped.

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

"Would you like a soak in the hot tub?" Padmé asked Vader as they entered their hotel room.

"Sounds great," Vader said, sitting down on the sofa. "I'm hungry," he said, leaning back.

"I guess you worked up an appetite," she told him with a smile, walking to the fresher.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Shall I order up something?"

"I'm fine," she called to him. "Go ahead."

Vader stood up and shrugged off his cloak and then walked to the comm.. He scanned over the menu, and then smiled as he saw something that caught his attention. Placing his order, he returned to the sofa to wait for room service to arrive.

"Are you coming?" Padmé called from the next room.

"Just waiting for room service," he called back.

"I'm getting lonely in here," she called back.

Vader smiled, and was about to get up to keep her company when his comlink went off. He frowned as he activated it, knowing who it was before he even heard the voice at the other end.

"Lord Vader, I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Vader felt his entire body grow tense, as he raised his mental shields. "Nothing important," he replied.

"Good," Palpatine replied. "I have good news, Lord Vader."

Vader hesitated, but only for a moment before replying. "Oh? What is that, my master?" he asked.

"The vote has been taken, Vader," Palpatine replied. "You've done well keeping Amidala away as long as you have. The army has been sanctioned by the Senate, there's nothing stopping us now from moving ahead with our plans."

Vader frowned. "That is... very good news," he replied, doing his best to sound enthusiastic. "May I ask how you managed to turn the opinion of the Senate in favor of the army?"

"It was quite simple, actually," Palpatine replied. "That idiotic gungan, Jar Jar Binks was quite useful as Amidala's stand in. Amedda simply suggested that emergency powers ought to be voted to me in order to counter act the growing separatists threats, and the fool fell for it." Palpatine cackled merrily. "I'm certain your dear wife will be looking for a new assistant quite soon."

Vader didn't reply, for a sinking feeling was rapidly filling him. "Yes, no doubt," he replied at last.

"When is this farce of a honeymoon over, anyway?" Palpatine asked the contempt clear in his voice.

"Three more days," Vader replied.

"Very well," Palpatine responded. "I suppose we must keep up appearances. I will have much for you to do when you return, Vader."

"Of course, Master," Vader replied automatically. "I... I can't wait to get back."

"No doubt the Senator has become tiresome," Palpatine sympathized.

"Yes, very much so," Vader responded.

"Ah well, it will be over soon, Vader," Palpatine replied. "I'll expect you first thing in the morning four days hence."

"I won't be late," Vader assured him.

"Be sure that you're not," Palpatine warned. "Enjoy the rest of your honeymoon, Lord Vader," he added sarcastically, and then ended the transmission.

Vader sat for a moment, anxiety filling him. He looked down at the comlink in his hand, and closed his hand around, wanting to crush it to bits. *She will think I knew about this*, he realized. *She will think that I kept her away from the capital on purpose...*

His musings were interrupted by the door chime, and he stood up and walked to the door.

"Room service, Lord Vader," the young man at the door announced.

Vader simply nodded and allowed the waiter to wheel the cart into the room. As soon as he'd left, Vader walked over to the cart and looked at what he'd ordered. Champagne, strawberries covered in chocolate, black cherries, shurba fruit sorbet... all things he'd noticed that his wife loved. He frowned, what had seemed a great idea mere minutes ago now seeming an empty, useless gesture. *When she finds out what has happened, none of this will matter... nothing will matter, even the fact that you love her. In fact, she probably won't even believe that you do.*

"Are you coming?"

Vader turned and looked at the doorway of the bedroom where Padmé stood with her hair piled up on her head, her robe on. She looked at the cart. "What did you order?"

"All your favorites," he told her, wheeling the cart over for her inspection.

Padmé looked at the cart with a smile. "You are spoiling me," she told him.

Vader nodded. "You are worthy of spoiling," he said.

She looked up at him; something in his tone telling her he was troubled. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Vader sighed, not knowing how to tell her. "I just heard from Palpatine," he told her. "He..."

"No," she said, cutting him off with a finger over his lips. 'I don't want to hear his name,' she told him. "For the rest of our time here, I forbid you from mentioning that man."

Vader frowned, torn between granting her wish and telling her the truth, a truth she needed to know. "But there's something you need to know," he told her.

"Nothing is important enough to ruin our special time," she replied. "We only have three days left, Ani. Let's not let him ruin them, okay?"

"Very well," he said at last, taking her by the shoulders.

Padmé smiled. "Now come on," she said, taking his hand and leading him into the fresher. "Time to relax."

Vader got undressed as Padmé slipped out of her robe and stepped into the hot tub.

"Champagne?" he asked her, opening the bottle.

"Yes please," she replied, settling into the warmth of the tub.

Vader poured them each a glass and then walked over to the tub and handed her one of the flutes. "Milady," he said.

"Thank you," she replied. "Bring that cart closer," she asked.

Vader smiled. "I thought you said you weren't hungry?" he said, rolling the cart over to the tub. He stepped into the warm water, and then proceeded to float a strawberry over to Padmé. She smiled and bit it in midair.

"Well, not for my favorites," she admitted, taking the strawberry between a finger and thumb and biting into it again.

Vader watched her, torn between his desire for her and his anxiety over withholding the news about the vote from her.

"Aren't you hungry?" she asked.

Vader shook his head as he continued to watch her.

She frowned. "You were earlier," she said. 'Before you heard from Palpatine,' she added, realizing why he'd lost his appetite. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he implored the irony too much for him. "I can handle him."

"I know," she said, moving over to him. "I just hate that he feels he can intrude whenever it suits him."

"I'm afraid you'll have to get used to that," he told her as she sat beside him, leaning her head against him.

"Not for long, I hope," she told him, running her hand over his bare chest. "It won't be easy to hide our true feelings from him for long."

“No it won’t,” he agreed, putting his arm around her. He lifted his hand and brought another strawberry to his hand. He brought it to Padmé’s mouth. She leaned back and let him feed her.

“Delicious,” she murmured.

The sight of her enticing mouth eating the juicy berry was so sexy that Vader could feel himself getting excited again. His mind was telling him that sex was the last thing he ought to engage in, but his body had other ideas. He was so drawn to her that he was helpless to resist.

“So are you,” he told her pulling her closer so that she was sitting on his lap.

“And you call me insatiable,” she told him with a smile.

“You, my dear Senator, are irresistible,” he told her, wrapping his arms around her waist. He pulled her close and nuzzled along her neck.

Padmé smiled, and closed her eyes too, loving the way his body felt next to hers.

Vader closed his eyes as he felt her nibbling on his earlobe. How could he resist her when she had the ability to seduce him so completely and effortlessly? “You’re incredible,” he told her. “Do you know that?”

Padmé smiled. “So are you,” she told him. ‘You make me feel so alive,’ she told him softly into his ear as she nibbled on his earlobe. “I never dreamed I could feel this way.”

“Neither have I,” he told her. “It’s like my life has finally begun. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Padmé.”

Padmé felt her throat constrict, so moved was she by his words. She knew that he had lived a difficult life, enduring more in the past fifteen years than most had to endure in a lifetime. She knew that there was still much darkness in him; she’d be fooling herself to think otherwise. But she also knew that the man that was buried under the years of abuse and layers of darkness was one that was worth fighting for.

As for Vader, any thoughts of telling her what had happened, any worries he had about her reaction were banished from his mind as their mouths met in a passionate kiss.

And then, from the bedroom, the sound of a comlink started. Vader looked down at her, knowing that it was hers. She shook her head. “Ignore it,” she told him.

“Okay,” he agreed, only too happy to do so.

But the comlink did not let up. It persisted to the point where it became annoying. Padmé finally looked over at the bedroom door. “What can be so important that someone has to disturb us on our honeymoon?” she asked in irritation.

Vader shrugged, realizing that it was more than likely someone letting her know about the vote. “Probably Jar Jar,” he told her with a smile. “Maybe he’s lost in your office again.”

Padmé laughed. And still the comlink continued. She frowned, starting to grow concerned. “Maybe it’s my parents,” she said. ‘Maybe something is wrong,’ she looked down at him. “I’m sorry Ani; I think I’d better get it.”

Vader said nothing as she got off of his lap and stepped out of the tub. Wrapping a towel around her quickly, she ran into the bedroom to answer the com. Vader leaned his hands on the ceramic tiles behind him and closed his eyes. She was about to find out what he had tried so hard to tell her earlier, he was certain of it. And once she found out that he knew and hadn't told her... he hated to think of her reaction.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

Vader got out of the tub and grabbed a towel. Drying himself off, he walked over to the bedroom and stood in the doorway as Padmé sat on the bed in communication with whoever it was who'd had interrupted them. Although he couldn't hear what was being said, the emotions he felt emanating from her reaffirmed his worst fears. He sensed anger, shock, outrage and a strong sense of betrayal. She looked over at the doorway where he was standing, a look of anguish in her eyes. Ending the transmission she stood up and walked over to him.

"Palpatine has his army," she told him. "He was voted emergency powers and his first order of business was to commission a clone army."

Vader nodded. "I know," he replied.

Padmé's eyes widened. "You know??" she cried. "How do you know?"

"Palpatine told me," he responded. "That was what he was contacting me about earlier."

"Doesn't it seem like an amazing coincidence that this happened when we were away from Coruscant? Or should I say when *I* was away?" she asked.

Vader didn't respond at once, not knowing how he could possibly answer this without incriminating himself. "I'm sure it isn't a coincidence, Padmé," he said at last. "Palpatine no doubt planned this all along, ever since I first told him we were getting married."

Padmé sat down on the edge of the bed. "I... I'm in shock," she replied at last. "I'm confused and angry and I feel utterly betrayed. Palpatine has what he wants, and has used me to get it."

Vader walked over to her and knelt down on the floor before her. He took her hands in his and looked up at her. "I know," he told her. "Palpatine is a master manipulator. He stops at nothing to get what he wants, and uses anyone he must to get his way." He stopped, looking down at his and hers entwined in her lap. "I never should have dragged you into this," he said quietly.

Padmé frowned. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

He looked back up at her. "I think you know," he said. "I never should have forced you to marry me. If you hadn't, this never would have happened. You'd have been there to stop him."

"Are you saying you regret marrying me?" she asked.

"In a way, yes," he admitted. "I should have realized that Palpatine would have planned something like this," he continued.

Padmé watched him, not wanting to believe the conclusions her mind was rapidly jumping to. “Were you a part of those plans, Anakin?” she asked quietly.

Vader frowned. “No, of course not!” he responded vehemently. “How can you ask me that?”

“Because you didn’t tell me about this,” she replied. “Because when you insisted I marry you, you didn’t care anything about me. And I can’t help but wonder if this was why you insisted we got married so quickly.”

“First of all you didn’t let me tell you earlier,” he retorted. “I tried to but you refused to listen. You didn’t want to hear Palpatine’s name, remember?”

“Yes, but you should have insisted,” she replied. “If you’d really wanted me to know you’d have insisted!”

“I feel sick about this! I wanted desperately to tell you but you... you’re being completely unreasonable!” he retorted, starting to grow angry.

“Am I? You didn’t feel sick enough to prevent you from having sex,” she pointed out. “Somehow if your conscience was bothering you as much as you claim you’d not have been so quick to get aroused,” she added.

Vader looked at her, his frustration morphing into rage. “So what is it you’re saying, Padmé? That I’m a liar? Or maybe a hypocrite? Which one is it?”

Padmé didn’t know what she was saying; all she knew was that she was hurting more than she ever had.

“I once told you that I’d never lie to you,” he said. “Do you remember that?”

She nodded.

“So why don’t you believe me now?” he asked. “I knew nothing of Palpatine’s plans, I swear it!”

Padmé wanted to believe him, but she still remembered the cruelty with which he had forced her to marry him, how much he had enjoyed it when he had shown when she had broken her engagement to Palo. Yes, he had changed, but he had admitted to her that he’d married her to control her. How was it possible that he had no knowledge of this plan? And yet, even though they had admitted to loving one another, he still had not revealed it to her. Had he been using her all this time? Had he only pretended to love her, while all the time lulling her into a false sense of security?

Padmé lowered her eyes, not quite sure what to say. “I want to believe you,” she said at last. “I really do,” she continued. “But I find it very hard to believe that this wasn’t part of your rationale for marrying me in the first place.”

“Do you doubt my love for you?” he asked.

The look in his eyes grabbed at her heart, and her eyes filled with tears. “I don’t know what to believe,” she said, her voice full of quiet desperation.

Vader was at a loss to know what to say to her. She was right after all; given his past, given the cold and ruthless manner in which he had forced himself into her life, how could she not have misgivings about him now, even after the past few days? He was a Sith, he had spent the past fifteen years steeped in Darkness, and the past two as the apprentice of a man who was evil incarnate. What did his words of love mean in light of all this?

“Listen to me,” he said. He waited until she raised her eyes to his before continuing. ‘I know that at the beginning of our relationship things were less than ideal. I was cold and arrogant, cruel and thoughtless. But you know why I was, you know that I knew nothing else. I know that doesn’t excuse my behavior, but I also know that I have changed since you’ve been in my life. I’ve never felt the way you make me feel, I’ve never felt so connected to someone as I do to you. If Palpatine had included me in this dastardly plan, I would have told you by now. There’s no way I could make love to you knowing that, Padmé. No way at all.’ He stopped for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. “I don’t know how to prove myself to you, Padmé. All I can do is hope that you know me well enough by now to realize that I would never betray you this way.”

Padmé listened to his heartfelt declaration, her eyes filling with tears as she did. She reached over and took his face in her hands. “Ani,” she said softly.

Vader moved forward and wrapped his arms around her, relieved that she believed him at last.

“I want to go back to Coruscant,” she told him. “I need to know what’s going on.”

Vader pulled back and looked at her. “We can’t,” he told her.

Padmé frowned. “Why not?” she demanded.

Vader sighed. “Because Palpatine expects us to stay here for three more days,” he said.

“So? Don’t you think he’s interfered in our lives enough?” she replied.

“Yes he has,” he agreed. “But I also think that if we push our luck, he will become suspicious. He cannot know that I have learned the truth, or that you and I are in love. We can’t give him any reason to question our motives, Padmé. Not now, not yet.”

Padmé sighed, a frown forming on her brow. “Yes you’re right,” she admitted at last. ‘I hate him, Anakin,’ she said quietly. “I can’t wait for the day when he is out of our lives for good.”

“Neither can I,” Vader replied. “That day cannot come fast enough for me, Padmé.”

“So what will happen next?” she asked as he sat down on the bed beside her.

“Palpatine plans to use the clone army to stop the separatists,” he told her. “Along with the Jedi.”

“You mean he plans to start a war?” she asked. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

Vader nodded. “But the war is only a front,” he told her. “It’s his way of spreading the Jedi around the galaxy in order to accomplish the final step in his plan.”

Padmé frowned. “And what is that?” she asked. “The final step?”

"The annihilation of the Jedi," he told her. "He plans to have the clones destroy the Jedi."

Padmé stared at him in disbelief, the magnitude of what he'd described too much to comprehend.

"He is going to...destroy the Jedi?" she asked at last. "That is his big plan??"
Vader nodded. "He has spent a long time gaining their trust, and had ensured that I do the same. The Jedi have no idea what is coming, they have no idea that Palpatine is a Sith. They won't even see it coming."

Padmé was silent for a long time. Even Palpatine seemed incapable of such a monstrous deed. And yet, given what she knew of him now, it didn't really seem that incredible.

"We have to stop him," she said at last. "This cannot happen, Anakin. You have to tell the Jedi who and what he is so that they can prevent this catastrophe from ever happening."

Vader nodded. "I know," he replied. "But given my association with Palpatine, will the Jedi believe me?"

"You have to make them believe you," she told him. "The very future of the galaxy is at stake, Anakin."

How ironic, he thought. *The galaxy is now depending on the slave boy...* "You know I'll do whatever I can, Padmé," he said. "In fact, I have a plan that I've been thinking about since I learned the truth. But it will depend on whether or not the Jedi can trust me. If they can, it will work. If they can't..."

"They will," she averred, running one hand into his hair. "Because I will be there to help you convince them. I'm not letting you carry this burden alone, Anakin. We will defeat Palpatine together."

Vader nodded, wondering once more what he would have ever done without this remarkable woman in his life.

"Tell me about your plans," Padmé asked as they moved back to lie on the bed.

"I'm going to kill Dooku," he told her, pulling the quilt up over them.

Padmé looked up at him from the crook of his arm. "How are you going to do that?" she asked. "How will you find him?"

"I suspect that Palpatine knows where he is," Vader replied. "He knows a great deal more than he lets on," he added bitterly. "I will make him believe that it's his idea," he continued. "His ego won't stand for it if I actually have a plan of my own."

"What about the Jedi?" Padmé asked. "Will you include them in your plan?"

"I don't know yet," he admitted. "To be honest I haven't quite thought it through completely. But I know that Palpatine wants him out of the way," he continued. "He's let Dooku become a threat in order to justify commissioning the clone army," he explained. "And now that he has it, he will be more than ready to eliminate him."

Padmé listened, realizing how truly far reaching Palpatine's plans were. She herself felt as though she had helped him with those plans when she'd been queen of Naboo. "He truly is a

master manipulator,” she commented at last. ‘I know now that he maneuvered me into calling for a vote of no confidence against Chancellor Valorum,’ she told him. “I was so desperate to save Naboo and he seemed so sincere in his desire to help that I played right into his hands. He may not even be in the position he’s in now if I hadn’t been so naïve.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Angel,” he told her. “Palpatine is ruthless and clever. He would have found a way to become Chancellor no matter what.”

Padmé sighed, appreciating his words. “You’re probably right,” she replied. “Still, I can’t help but feel somewhat responsible.”

Vader kissed the top of her head. “That’s because you’re a woman of morals and singular integrity,” he told her.

“Thank you, Ani,” she said, snuggling up to him. How could she ever have doubted him? She felt a pang of guilt as she thought of how she’d accused him. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said softly, running a hand over his chest. “I never should have doubted you.”

Vader pulled her close, the love he felt for her literally rendering him speechless.

“We were interrupted earlier, weren’t we?” she told him, looking up at him with a smile.

Vader looked down at her, recognizing the twinkle in her eyes. “Yes, as a matter of fact we were,” he responded.

With a smile she pushed him onto his back and kissed his chin, and then down his throat, and then down over his chest. Vader closed his eyes, letting her take control, loving the way she did so so unabashedly. She looked up at him with a smile. “Now where were we?” she asked demurely.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

The next three days flew by, and before either of them could catch their breath, it was time to return to Coruscant. Both were dreading having to return to the life they would be forced to live there, for they knew that there was simply no way they could carry on, at least in public, as they had while on Bellassa. Having to put up the pretence of hating one another would be the most challenging thing either of them had ever done. They took some comfort in the fact that in the privacy of their home they could be themselves; but both were very public figures and both knew that the smallest thing would get back to Palpatine.

It was late when they arrived at 500 Republica Boulevard. Dormé had moved out, as per Vader's demand, and the apartment was quiet and dark when they stepped off of the lift.

"Home sweet home," Vader said as they entered the apartment, the lights turning on as they did so.

"Yes, back to reality," Padmé sighed. "I will miss the hot tub," she told him.

"Yes, so will I," he told her. "Maybe we could get one installed," he suggested with a smile.

Padmé laughed. "Yes, Palpatine wouldn't be at all suspicious of that, would he?"

Vader frowned. "No, I guess that's a bad idea," he realized. 'At least for now,' he added, pulling her into his embrace. "It won't always be like this, Padmé," he told her. "I don't plan on letting Palpatine live much longer."

"That's good to hear," she replied. "The galaxy will rejoice on that day."

Vader nodded. "We ought to get to bed," he told her. "He's expecting me first thing in the morning."

"And so it begins," she said as they made their way to the bedroom. "The big performance."

"There won't be any performing while we're here," he assured her. "Unless you mean sexual performance, of course," he added with a grin.

Padmé laughed. "Well that sort of performance I appreciate," she told him.

"Yes, so do I," he replied. "The thing is, it requires a great deal of practice to get it right," he added.

Padmé nodded in agreement. "Yes, one can never have too much practice," she agreed as they reached the bedroom.

"I couldn't agree more, Senator," Vader replied as he pulled her into his arms once again.

The next morning...

Vader prepared himself mentally as the lift carried him upwards to the office of the chancellor. Vader knew that he'd changed a great deal since he'd seen Palpatine last, and he needed all his mental focus not to allow his master to detect the changes in them. Keeping his mental shields firmly in place, he stepped off the lift and walked confidently towards Palpatine's inner sanctum.

Palpatine was standing at the window looking out at the city when Vader entered the office. He did not turn to face his apprentice but merely decided to make Vader wait to be acknowledged.

"Welcome back, Lord Vader," Palpatine said at last, turning to him finally. "I trust you had a restful holiday."

"Not particularly," Vader replied.

"Oh? And why is that?" Palpatine asked.

Vader shrugged. "It's not easy being in the company of someone who despises you utterly," he said. "It's a relief to be back here."

Palpatine nodded, studying the young man closely. He sensed something in Vader, something he could not quite put a finger on. There was an air of confidence about him that Palpatine was not accustomed to, and he wondered from whence it had come. "You seem quite pleased with yourself, Vader," he said at last. "Is there a reason for this?"

Vader thought fast. "Simply that I have been successful in breaking down Senator Amidala's resolve," he said at last. "She has been quite... submissive."

"Has she?" Palpatine asked, narrowing his eyes. "And how did you accomplish this?"

Vader shrugged as he sat down. "She's not as tough as she lets on," he said. "And certainly no match for me," he added.

Palpatine smiled. "That's good to hear," he replied. "Of course, now that the army has been commissioned, the sham you've been living will no longer be necessary."

"What do you mean?" Vader asked.

"I mean she has served her purpose," Palpatine explained. "She can no longer hinder us in our plans, Vader. There is no longer any reason to remain married to her."

"No," Vader agreed, "however it may be something of a public scandal were I to end our marriage so soon," he pointed out.

"Yes, true," Palpatine replied with a sour face. 'As much as I hate them, the media is still a necessary ally,' he added. "Very well, give it another month. And after that month, divorce her quietly. I'm sure she will be only too happy to comply."

"Yes, no doubt," Vader agreed.

"In the meantime, I have an assignment for you," Palpatine continued. "I want Dooku dead."

"Have you located him?" Vader asked.

“Yes, he and his band of traitors are on Geonosis,” Palpatine replied. “I want him to pay for his treachery.”

Vader nodded. “I will see to it personally,” he replied. “And the droid army?”

“I want it nullified,” Palpatine replied. “You will take a squadron of clones with you as well as a few of the Jedi. I want the foundry destroyed, I want the separatists killed. It’s time Dooku was punished for his treachery. He’s lived far longer than he deserved.”

“I agree,” Vader replied. “When should I leave?”

“As soon as the arrangements can be made,” Palpatine replied. “I expect our first wave of clones to be arriving at the capital today some time. Go to the Jedi Council and give them my orders. I want this taken care of as soon as possible, Vader.”

“Of course, my master,” Vader replied, standing up. “I will go to them now. Is there anything else?”

“No,” Palpatine replied. “You may leave,” he added, turning away from him.

Vader bowed respectfully and then turned and left the office, unable to stop the smile from spreading across his face.

As soon as Vader had left, Palpatine depressed a comm. button on his desk. “Send him in,” he told his assistant. At once the door to his office opened again, and a rather surly looking individual entered the room. He was guarded closely by a blue robed guard who kept his weapon at the ready lest the stranger do anything foolish.”

“What do you have for me?” Palpatine asked.

The man said nothing, but handed Palpatine a holodisc. Palpatine took the disc and fed it into a holoreader on his desk. After a moment or two, a holographic image of a couple on a beach appeared. The man was caressing the woman, who wore very little clothing. Palpatine frowned in disgust at the images, which quickly switched to a darkened dance floor. The same man and woman were dancing very closely; the man was kissing the woman’s neck, his hands grasping her bottom lewdly. So, *Lord Vader*, he thought angrily, *I can see why you got very little rest on your holiday...*

“You’ve done well,” he told the spy. He opened a drawer and handed him a thick packet. “That should cover your fee and then some,” he told the man.

The man took the packet, thumbed through the credits greedily and then bobbed his head in acknowledgment before leaving the room once more.

Palpatine sat down, his mind working feverishly on a plan. He had threatened to kill Senator Amidala should there be any hint of a physical relationship between her and Vader; but now he wondered if an alternative retaliation might be more satisfying. After all, once she was dead, he couldn’t make her suffer any more, could he? He wanted them both to suffer, particularly Vader, for daring to oppose him. After a few moments pondering, an idea began to take form in his mind, and he smiled.

Vader stepped off of the lift and headed to the office where his wife had already begun her day. Even though they had only been apart for less than two hours, he was already missing her.

Padmé stood with her back to the door when he entered the room. He smiled, looking up at the holocamera and froze it. Making sure the door behind him was locked, he then stole up on his wife, wrapping his arms around her from behind and kissing her neck.

Padmé jumped, but soon relaxed when she realized who it was. “Ani,” she smiled. “What are you doing here?”

“I missed you,” he told her, nibbling on her ear.

Padmé smiled. “But you just saw me at home!” she laughed.

“I know,” he replied. ‘But that was almost two hours ago,’ he told her, grazing her neck with his lips. “A long time for a lovesick man.”

Padmé turned so that she was facing him. “Is that what you are?” she asked, running her hands up into his hair.

Vader nodded. “Absolutely,” he said, wrapping his arms around her waist. ‘I’m completely under your spell, Senator,’ he told her. “I can’t breathe that you’re not in my thoughts,” he continued, bending to kiss her.

Padmé could easily lose herself in the moment, for even though she hadn’t admitted it, she had missed him as much as he had missed her. But she also knew that she had to be the voice of reason, and engaging in this sort of behavior in public, despite their precautions, was not wise. Padmé had to remind herself that her new husband, despite all his powers, was not even twenty yet. Being his senior by five years, she realized that it would be up to her to rein things in when they threatened to get out of hand.

“Ani, I don’t think this is the best place for this, do you?” she told him as she broke their kiss at last.

Vader looked down at her. “I guess not,” he admitted reluctantly, releasing her. He took a seat before her desk as she sat down on the other side.

“How did your meeting with Palpatine go?” she asked.

“Much better than I anticipated,” Vader replied. “He ordered me to go to Geonosis,” he told her.

Padmé’s eyes widened. “Really? When?”

“As soon as we can get the plans arranged,” he replied. “I need to get over to the Jedi Council and fill them in.”

“So, you’ll be leaving soon then?” she asked, suddenly struck with a wave of anxiety. ‘In a few days, yes,’ he replied. “We’ll have to scout the place out first before we can decide upon a course of action.”

“I see,” she replied, the thought of him in danger filling her with a cold sense of dread. “I just hope this doesn’t turn into a full scale war,” she commented with a frown.

“If we are successful, there won’t be a war,” he told her. “That’s the whole reason we’re doing this.”

“You mean that’s the reason Palpatine is feeding to the Jedi,” she responded. “And to the public at large. He’ll no doubt look like quite the hero if he managed to neutralize Dooku and his cronies, not to mention the droid army.”

Vader nodded. “You are starting to understand the way his mind works,” he said. “He’s very clever, Padmé; maintaining one public face while in reality he is nothing like who he appears to be.”

Padmé shook her head. “I’ve known him for years, Anakin,” she told him. “I can’t believe I never knew what kind of a monster he truly is.”

“No one knows, Padmé,” he assured her. “Even the Jedi. They have been looking for a Sith Lord for years, ever since that creature you described, Darth Maul, was killed by Obi-Wan Kenobi. And all the while the man they’re looking for has been right under their noses, but they are too blind and too complacent to see it.”

“But you will change all that,” she pointed out. “And because of you, the Jedi will avert extinction. They will be indebted to you forever, Ani.”

Vader hadn’t considered that, but she was right. “I can’t think about that right now,” he told her, standing up. “There’s a long road ahead of us before that day, Senator.”

She looked up at him. “I know,” she replied. “Are you going to see them now? The Jedi?”

Vader nodded. “Palpatine wants this operation to go down as soon as possible,” he told her. ‘And I personally am looking forward to killing that bastard, Dooku,’ he added, his eyes hardening. “He’s going to pay for everything he’s done; I’ll see to it.”

Padmé did not know how to reply to such a statement, and it unnerved her more than she wanted to admit. Despite the gains he had made, her husband was still a Sith, very much immersed in the Dark Side. And yet, who could blame him for wanting revenge after what Dooku had done? Who wouldn’t?

“I’ll see you later,” he told her, leaning over her desk to kiss her. Padmé kissed him back. “I love you,” he told her.

Padmé smiled. “I love you too,” she said. “I’ll see you at home.”

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

Jedi Temple

Vader arrived at the Council chamber just as the meeting had started.

"We did not expect to see you here today, Vader," Mace Windu remarked as Vader took his seat. "Why aren't you still on your honeymoon?"

Vader frowned. "I have duties here that cannot be neglected any longer," he replied. "I have just come from the Chancellor's office as a matter of fact. He has ordered me to go to Geonosis."

"Why Geonosis?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Dooku is there," Vader replied.

This created a murmur of surprise among the Jedi.

"How does the Chancellor know this?" Windu asked suspiciously.

"He has spies everywhere," Vader replied, not feeling as though he was divulging anything surprising. "I imagine one of them gave him the information. He wants us to take a squadron of clones there and neutralize the droid army as well as the separatists."

Windu exchanged a look with the other Jedi.

"And if the spies are wrong?" Ki-Adi Mundi asked. "We are wasting valuable time and energy on a fool's errand."

Vader looked at the Jedi. "In that case, I suggest we have a scouting mission first," he said. "In order to reconnoiter the planet. I'll go myself. I have a personal score to settle with Count Dooku."

"A wise plan," Yoda remarked. 'But alone you must not go. Too risky it is.' He looked around the group. "Master Kenobi will go with you."

Obi-Wan nodded and looked at Vader. "When do we leave?"

"The first wave of clones are due to arrive here on the capital today," Vader replied. "I say we wait for them to arrive so we can make plans with the commander just in case Dooku is there. If they are there, we'll need them to help."

"Sounds like a good plan," Windu remarked. He sighed. "If we can pull this off, it will avert a war, Vader."

Vader nodded. "I know, Master Windu," he replied. "And believe me, there's nothing I want more."

His remark surprised several of the Jedi, who expected that Palpatine's right hand would be more than happy at the prospect of war.

"Might I suggest we start our preliminary preparations?" Obi-Wan said.

"Yes, good idea," Vader agreed. "Have you ever been to Geonosis, Master Kenobi?" he asked Obi-Wan.

"Not yet," Obi-Wan replied. "But there's a first time for everything," he added with a smile.

Vader nodded, remembering how Padmé had suggested he place his trust in Kenobi. He was beginning to see why. "Yes, there is," he agreed. "Let's get to work."

It was with great trepidation and awe that the leaders of the Republican Senate watched the arrival of a squadron of clone troopers later that afternoon. Enormous Republic Assault ships, each 752 meters long, had landed on Corusant, each holding hundreds of white armored clones. They were an awesome sight as they marched in formation and stood at attention to await their orders.

From his vantage point high above the parade grounds, Palpatine surveyed the troops, immensely pleased with his new fighting force. They clones were bred to be perfect fighting machines, who would take orders without question and perform them to the utmost efficiency. He smiled when he reflected on the role they would play in his plans, plans that would see him as the undisputed leader of the galaxy in a very short time.

Beside Palpatine stood his right hand, Darth Vader, who watched the scene below with his trademark indiscernible expression. The sight of the clones was both impressive and terrifying, for their presence on the capital meant that Palpatine was getting close to realizing his plans. And now that he saw the clones, Vader knew that there was no doubt that they would be able to carry out their orders to the letter. And once Palpatine had the awesome force of this army at his fingertips, he would be unstoppable.

"Well Lord Vader? Rather impressive, aren't they?"

Vader turned to look at the chancellor, his mental shields hiding all his misgivings from him. "Indeed," he relied. "A very fine army, my master. As you had requested."

Palpatine smiled, glancing about briefly to the handful of senators who were present with him on the high balcony. Bail Organa stood close by, his fists clenched in frustration. He, like Senator Amidala, had been very much against the formation of this army. And now he felt utterly helpless as the seemingly endless sea of clones poured forth from the enormous transport ships. He glanced over at Padmé and could see that she was as upset as she was. Organa noted with disgust that Padmé's husband stood beside the Chancellor rather than his own wife, making him think more than ever that their marriage was nothing more than a sham. Why someone like Padmé would ever agree to marry a man like Darth Vader was beyond his comprehension. Clearly there were some underlying reasons for their union, extortion being one that Organa would not put past Vader.

Bail Organa was not the only one who had noted Senator Amidala. Palpatine watched Padmé with barely concealed delight, knowing, despite the senator's stoic expression that she was suffering inwardly. She had fought long and hard to prevent the formation of the army,

and no doubt felt terrible about being absent when the vote had been taken. *I'm so sorry about that, my dear Senator*, he thought gleefully. *But I have no time or place for bleeding hearts in my galaxy.*

Vader could see that Palpatine was enjoying Padmé's agony, and felt his hatred for the old man increase exponentially. He hated that he had used he and Padmé's marriage as a springboard to launch his plans; but then again, Palpatine was a manipulator, and used people as he saw fit. *That will end soon*, Vader reflected. *I will see to it.*

Padmé looked over at her husband, her expression inscrutable. She knew that he could feel how she felt, she didn't need to show him. Her eyes moved to Palpatine next who, to her alarm, was watching her closely. She forced herself to nod respectfully at him, a tiny hint of a smile on her face. But Palpatine wasn't fooled; he knew that she hated him passionately. This only made his smile grow as he returned her nod of greeting, the thoughts of his plans for the Senator pleasing him very much.

Seeing the clones unmasked was disconcerting, for their faces were all identical. Cloned from a rather dodgy fellow known as Jango Fett, the thousands of clones had been created and trained to be the ultimate soldiers. And yet, one on one, some of them seemed to have some personality of their own, and were quite personable. Commander Cody was one such clone.

Cody along with Vader and members of the Jedi Council, sat on board one of the large transport ships ironing out their plan for their mission to Geonosis.

"It is imperative that the Separatists not suspect our presence," Obi-Wan was saying. "If our suspicions are correct, they have amassed an enormous army which is present on the planet. The last thing we want is to be ambushed, gentlemen."

"Agreed," Vader replied. "I propose that you and I go alone, Master Kenobi," he said. "To scout out the situation first. Once we have ascertained that what the spies have reported is accurate, we will contact you, Master Windu, in order to set into motion the next part of the plan."

Windu nodded. "Geonosis is on the other side of the galaxy, Vader," he said. "If you two get into trouble..."

"Might I suggest that we hold up outside the system," Cody put in. "Far enough away to be undetected but close enough that we can jump in quickly."

Obi-Wan looked at Vader and then back at Cody as he nodded in approval. "I think that's a wise precaution," he said.

"Yes, so do I," Vader agreed. He looked at Windu and Master Yoda who was also present. "What do you think?" he asked.

"A sound plan," Yoda said. "Make the preparations we must."

"If we can catch them unawares, we may be able to prevent a war, gentlemen," Windu said. "Let's make sure we leave nothing to chance."

"Agreed," Obi-Wan said. He looked at Commander Cody. "Brief your men and have them ready to leave at 0600 hours."

“Yes sir,” Cody replied. “We’ll be ready.”

0600? Vader thought, groaning inwardly.

Kenobi looked at Vader, sensing his reaction. He was pleasantly surprised by it and smiled. “We’ll try not to keep you from your new bride for too long, Lord Vader,” he said.

Vader looked at Kenobi in surprise and couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll hold you to that, Master Kenobi,” he replied.

500 Republica Boulevard

Vader returned to the apartment he now called home just as evening was falling over the city. He knew that Padmé would be anxious about his mission, but was confident that she would be able to see the larger picture.

Padmé was in the kitchen when he entered the room. “Are you cooking?” he asked.

Padmé turned to him. “You sound surprised,” she said.

“Well I am,” he replied. “You hate to cook.”

“Yes, true,” she admitted as she took a roast out of the oven. “But I love you, and you love to eat,” she told him, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Vader smiled. “Need some help?” he asked.

“You could set the table,” she said as she set to carving the roast.

“As you wish, milady,” he replied.

“That was very good,” Vader told Padmé as they sat down together in the large central area of the apartment later that evening. “And you said you couldn’t cook.”

Padmé smiled. “I said I didn’t like to cook,” she corrected him. “And thank you. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I did, thank you,” he replied. Neither of them wanted to talk about what was foremost on their minds, namely the mission to Geonosis. And yet, she needed to know, for he was leaving first thing in the morning. “Looks like tomorrow will be the big day,” he told her.

Padmé nodded. “I thought as much,” she replied. “What’s the plan?”

“An assault vessel carrying about two thousands clones will bring Kenobi and me to Geonosis tomorrow morning,” he told her. “He and I will go down to the planet to scout while the ship waits at the edge of the system.”

Padmé frowned, not liking what she was hearing. “You’re going down to a planet swarming with enemy droids and the clones are going to wait on the outside of the system?” she asked. “What if something goes wrong??”

Vader reached over and took her hand. “Nothing will go wrong,” he assured her. ‘We don’t plan to let them know we’re there, Senator,’ he reminded her with a smile. “That’s the whole idea of a scouting mission.”

“Don’t tease me,” she replied. “I hate this and you know it.”

Vader picked up her hand and kissed it. "I know you do," he replied. "But you have to look at it this way; this mission may very well prevent a war."

Padmé nodded, looking down at her hand in his. "I know," she said quietly. "I just hate the thought of you in danger."

Vader did not know what to say to her comment. It had been so long since someone had cared enough about him to actually worry about his well being that he was quite taken aback by the vehemence of her feelings. "Well, it's unavoidable," he said at last, grasping for the right thing to say. 'But I can take care of myself,' he added. "I've been doing that for a long time, Padmé. You don't need to worry."

Padmé looked up at him, knowing that he was uneasy with her admission. "I know you can," she replied. "But that doesn't mean I won't worry. I love you, Anakin. Of course I'll worry."

Vader smiled. "I love you too," he told her. "I'll be home before you know it," he told her, pulling her close.

Padmé closed her eyes as she relaxed into his strong, warm embrace. *I hope so, Ani*, she thought. *I really hope so.*

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

Vader groaned as the alarm on his side of the bed went off at five o'clock the next morning. Reaching over he turned it off before it awoke his wife. He rolled over and looked at her as she slept a peaceful expression on her face. Spending half the night making love had seemed a great idea at the time, but now he was wishing he'd had more than a paltry four hours of sleep. Planting a soft kiss on the tip of her nose, Vader rolled away and off of the bed, heading to the fresher for a shower that he hoped would wake him up.

Padmé awoke alone in her bed for the first time in more than a week, not liking the way it felt. She moved over to Vader's side of the bed, which was still warm. Taking his pillow, she wrapped her arms around it, willing herself not to get upset at the thought of him leaving.

Just then the fresher door opened and Vader entered the room, rubbing his hair with a towel. He glanced over at the bed, surprised to see that Padmé was awake. "Good morning, Senator," he said.

"Good morning," she replied, stretching. "You smell nice."

Vader smiled. "I wish I could jump right back into bed with you," he told her, opening a drawer and pulling out some shorts. "But I don't think I should be late."

"I know," she replied, watching him. She smiled. "Last night was amazing," she told him.

Vader nodded in agreement as he got dressed. "Yes it was," he told her. "I'm exhausted, but it was worth it."

Padmé smiled. "I couldn't agree more," she sighed. "I wish you didn't have to go," she said quietly.

Vader sat down on the side of the bed beside her. "I know," he replied, reaching over and running a hand into her tousled hair. "But it's not for long, just a few days at most."

Padmé nodded, knowing that he really had no idea how long he'd be gone any more than she did. "Will you be able to contact me at all while you're away?"

"I'll do my best," he told her standing up again to finish dressing. He glanced at the chrono on the side of the bed. "I'd better get going," he said.

Padmé sat up in the bed and watched him as he pulled on his boots. He then opened a drawer and took out his lightsaber, which raised Padmé's sense of alarm at once. "You're going to kill Dooku, aren't you?" she asked him.

Vader turned and looked at her. "Yes," he replied simply. "I've planned to do so for a long time."

Padmé nodded, not blaming him for wanting revenge. "Please be careful," she told him.

"I will be," he promised her, clipping his lightsaber on his belt. He turned to her, the moment of parting suddenly upon them. He walked over and sat down on the bed again, holding his arms open to her. Padmé moved over to him at once and he pulled her onto his lap.

"Please come home soon," she told him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Vader embraced her, stroking the long thick mane of chestnut hair that fell down her back, committing its scent to memory. "I will," he assured her. "I promise."

Padmé pulled back and looked at him, taking his face in her hands. "I love you," she told him.

"I love you too, Senator," he told her, kissing her. It would have been all too easy to allow the kiss to take control of them both, but Vader had to reign in his desire for her, and pulled back after a few moments. "I have to go," he said, pressing his brow to hers.

"I know," she replied. "Be safe."

"Of course," he said, kissing her on the forehead. "I'll contact when I can," he said as she climbed off his lap.

"Okay," she replied watching him as he stood up. She pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, willing herself not to get emotional.

Vader walked to the door and then turned and looked at her one more time. The sight of her naked in their bed, her thick hair tousled around her shoulders almost made him lose his resolve; but he simply smiled at her, and then left, knowing he was tempting fate if he stayed any longer.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was in the enormous docking bay behind the Jedi temple when Vader arrived.

"Good morning," Obi-Wan said upon seeing Vader.

"Morning," Vader replied. "Are we all set?"

"I believe so," Obi-Wan replied. 'I took the liberty of selecting a fighter for you to put on board the transport,' he told Vader. "I hope that's acceptable to you."

"That's fine," Vader replied, looking at one of the fighters nearby. "I can fly pretty much anything."

Obi-Wan cocked an eyebrow. "Is that so?" he replied.

"Yes," Vader replied, sensing the Jedi's skepticism. "Let's get going."

Geonosis was in the outer rim, and the journey there was a long one. The Jedi on board, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Mace Windu, took advantage of the long journey in order to go over their plans with Commander Cody. Vader was, of course, present at these meetings, doing his best not to let his fatigue show.

"Under no circumstances are you to engage the separatists," Windu was telling them, his instructions directed at Vader. "This is to be a covert operation; engagement will only take place with the support of our clone troops. Is that understood?"

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied. He looked at Vader, who had not yet replied.

“Vader?” Windu said, “is that clear?”

Vader looked at Windu, resenting the Jedi’s attempts to issue orders to him. “I know what to do,” he said at last. “I don’t need to be told, Windu.”

Windu frowned, and exchanged a glance with Kenobi, whose face bore the same passive expression as ever. “Don’t take matters into your own hands, Vader,” he said finally.

“I have a score to settle with Count Dooku,” Vader replied.

“Your vendetta is not as important as this mission, Vader,” Windu told him sternly. “If you can’t see that then perhaps you’re not the man to go on this scouting expedition.”

Vader looked at the arrogant Jedi Master, whom he had never liked. “I’m not an idiot, Windu,” he retorted. “I have no intention of jeopardizing this mission.”

Windu wasn’t fully convinced, but said nothing more. He looked at Kenobi as though to say ‘Keep him out of trouble’.

“Master Windu, we’ve reached the Geonosis System,” a clone announced as he entered the room.

“Good,” Windu replied. He looked at Obi-Wan and Vader. “It’s time, gentlemen.”

“We’re ready,” Obi-Wan replied, standing up. Vader joined him, and, without another word, they left the room and headed to the hangar deck.

It didn’t take Vader long to familiarize himself with the controls of the Jedi fighter. He had to admit that he was more than a little impressed with the technology and design of the ship and decided that he ought to acquire one for himself as soon as possible. He and Obi-Wan took off together from the enormous hangar bay of the ship and set their course for Geonosis, the second planet from the system’s sun, Ea.

“There’s an unusual concentration of Federation ships over there,” Obi-Wan commented.

“Acknowledged,” Vader replied. “We’d better stay clear.”

“Good idea.”

Night had fallen on the planet when the two men arrived. The two ships skimmed across the top of a small mesa along the edge of a rocky ridge. Maneuvering under rock overhangs, they neared the surface and landed. Getting out of their fighters, they looked around, peering into the darkness. The wind whipped at them, their cloaks flapping behind them.

“Nice place,” Vader quipped.

“Indeed,” Obi-wan agreed as they stumbled over the uneven ground. His foot slips on the edge of the mesa, sending a stream of pebbles skittering into the darkness.

Vader shot him a hot look. “Quiet!” he admonished.

Obi-Wan’s hand moved to the hilt of his lightsaber as they both listened intently, but were met with silence.

“Let’s go,” Obi-Wan said, and the two set off again, working their way around a narrow corner.

Before long the two men arrived at the head of the trail worn into the red rock. Far below, a flat plain stretched into the distance. They stopped, peering into the darkness, where strange shapes loomed indistinctly. Obi-Wan took a pair of electronic binoculars from his belt and put them to his eyes.

“What is it?” Vader asked.

“I’m not sure,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘I see a cluster of great towers, probably stalagmites, rising from the plain,’ he reported. He scanned the area and then stopped as a line of Battle Starships came into view. “It seems the chancellor’s information was correct,” he said, handing the binoculars to Vader.

Vader took them and brought them to his eyes. After a moment he touched the viewfinder. “There must be at least fifty Federation ships,” he said. ‘It looks like some are being taken to an underground facility.’ And then a startling sight stopped him. “Damn,” he muttered.

“What do you see?” Obi-Wan asked anxiously.

“Droids,” Vader told them. ‘Thousands of battle droids being loaded into ships, with others leaving the surface, no doubt full of droids.’ He removed the binoculars and looked at Obi-Wan. “Let’s get down there,” he said. “It will be light soon.”

Obi-Wan nodded grimly. “There must be a way inside,” he said. “Let’s continue along the trail.”

Light had begun to filter into the sky as Vader and Obi-Wan made their way along a narrow, pillared corridor.

“Look,” Vader said, pointing to a vent shaft. “Do you hear that?”

Obi-Wan nodded. They moved over to the opening and looked down to see a huge underground facility below. In one area, machines were constructing battle droids. In another area, completed droids were moving along a conveyor belt.

“Looks like they’ve been busy,” Vader quipped.

Obi-Wan looked at him with a smile. “Indeed,” he said. “Let’s see if we can find the ones behind all this.”

Vader nodded, and they continued on their way.

After walking for another thirty minutes, the two men arrived at a vast expanse in the stalagmite interior. The huge space was deserted and completely silent. Obi-Wan and Vader started to cross the square when suddenly they heard voices. They moved quickly behind a pillar as a group of beings from a variety of races approached. Among them was Count Dooku. Pressed flat against a pillar Vader felt his entire body tense up with hatred upon seeing the elderly Dooku once more. The two men waited for Dooku and his entourage to pass by before moving. Watching them leave through an archway on the far side of the courtyard, Vader noticed the flight of stairs beside it.

“This way,” Vader said as they moved off quickly and silently to the staircase. They sneaked up, and soon arrived at a narrow archway. Looking down through it, they spied a large conference room, with the separatists seated around the large round table.

“Now is the time, my friends,” Dooku was saying. “This is the moment when you have to decide between the Republic and the Confederacy of Independent Systems.”

Around the table sat the leader of the Geonosian people, Pogo the Lesser, members of the Senate, the commerce, bank and techno guilds, as well as trade federation dignitaries. Behind Dooku, who sat at the head of the table, stood the very bounty hunter who had acted as the host for the thousands of clones who now waited at the edge of the system, Jango Fett.

“As I explained to you earlier,” Dooku continued, “I’m quite convinced that ten thousand more systems will rally to our cause with your support, gentlemen. And let me remind you of our absolute commitment to capitalism... of the lower taxes, the reduced tariffs, and the eventual abolition of all trade barriers. Signing this treaty will bring you profits beyond your wildest imagination. What we are proposing is completely free trade. Our friends in the Trade Federation have pledged their support. When their Battle Droids are combined with yours, we shall have an army greater than anything in the galaxy, The Jedi will be overwhelmed. The Republic will agree to any demands we make.”

Vader looked at Obi-Wan at this disclosure.

“It seems we’ve arrived just in time to hear the Count incriminate himself,” Obi-Wan quipped.

Vader nodded. “Let’s contact the ship,” he said. “I’ve heard enough, haven’t you?”

“Yes, quite enough,” Obi-Wan agreed.

The two men pulled back from the archway and headed silently for the exit to make their report to the ship.

The sun was high above the red rocky planet surface by the time the two men found their way back to the surface. Vader watched as Obi-Wan climbed into his Jedi fighter to contact the transport ship. As he did so, Vader looked around at the strange, alien landscape. And then he had a feeling of approaching danger, and he walked around to check out the surroundings. From where he stood he could still see the fighter with Obi-Wan inside. But then, approaching rapidly, were two destroyer droids, weapons already firing.

Vader knew that Obi-Wan would not be able to get out of the ship in time to defend himself, and leapt into action. Lightsaber flashing, Vader deflected the energy bursts emitted by the droids’ weapons and slashed at them viciously as Obi-Wan scrambled out of the ship. Soon there were two lightsabers flashing, and it wasn’t long before the droids were destroyed.

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “I think you saved my life.”

“I know so,” Vader replied with a smile.

Obi-Wan nodded, not returning the smile. “Tell me something,” he said, “why is it you have a lightsaber, Vader? And why is the blade red?”

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

Vader and Obi-Wan simply looked at one another in silence for what seemed to be a very long time. Vader hadn't planned on revealing his secret to Obi-Wan so soon, but action had been required, and he hadn't thought twice about using his weapon to save Obi-Wan's life.

"This is hardly the place to get into this," Vader said at last. "More droids could be on their way right now."

Obi-Wan couldn't help but agree. "Very well," he replied, climbing back into his vessel. "Let's go back to the ship. You can explain yourself there."

Vader frowned as he climbed into his own ship. *This is the thanks I get for saving your skin, Kenobi?* He thought angrily.

The two men returned to the ship, where they were met in the hangar bay by Mace Windu. Vader had hoped that Kenobi wouldn't rat him out to Windu, for he knew that of the two Jedi, Windu was by far the more narrow minded.

"The situation is far graver than we anticipated, Master Windu," Kenobi reported. "We will need back up, and plenty of it."

Windu nodded. "I've already contacted the Council," he told them. "A small armada is on its way here right now."

"There are plenty of Federation ships full of droids ready to leave the planet," Vader informed him. "They have to be stopped."

"Commander Cody has his gunners prepared," Windu replied. "As well as a squadron of fighter pilots. I just hope it's enough," he felt compelled to add, ever the pessimist.

"Perhaps we could take some time while we wait for the armada to have something to eat," Kenobi suggested to Vader.

Vader looked at the Jedi, grateful that he'd said nothing about his discovery in front of Windu. "Yes, that's a good idea," Vader agreed.

Windu nodded. "Very well," he said. "You two have earned a break. I'll let you know when the transports arrive."

Obi-Wan and Vader walked in silence through the ship to the galley. Having selected a meal from the food replicators stationed around the enormous room, they sat down at a table together.

"Thank you for not saying anything in front of Master Windu," Vader said at last.

Obi-Wan looked up at him. "I can't promise you that I won't," he said. "It all depends on what you tell me."

“Understood,” Vader replied. He sighed. ‘Well, it’s a long story,’ he began. “Until I was four years old I lived on Tatooine with my mother,” he started. “We were slaves,” he continued, surprising Obi-Wan with this disclosure. “When I was four, a man came into the junk shop where I worked and told me that I had been sold, and that my mother would receive a large portion of the payment. I didn’t question it, I was only a child, and so I was taken away. It was Count Dooku who bought me,” he said, a frown coming over his brow at the mention of this name. “He brought me to Coruscant, to his master, Darth Sidious, Dark Lord of the Sith.”

Obi-Wan was startled. “You were sold to a Sith Lord?” he asked incredulously.

Vader nodded. “Yes,” he said. “The very Sith you’ve been looking for,” he continued.

“Who? Who is he?” Obi-Wan asked.

Vader looked at him, knowing that what he was about to say would shock Obi-Wan to his foundations. “Chancellor Palpatine,” he said finally. “He is the Sith Lord you’ve been looking for.”

Obi-Wan was unable to respond for a moment, so great was his surprise. But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. “Palpatine,” he said at last, nodding his head. ‘Yes, yes of course, it all adds up,’ he added. He looked at Vader. “You’re his apprentice?”

“I suppose you could say that,” Vader replied. “After Tyrannous, or as you know him, Dooku left, I took his place. I was almost seventeen.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “So... why are you telling me this?” he asked. “And more to the point, why did you save my life down there? If you’re truly a Sith, then you are the sworn enemy of the Jedi. Why would you save the life of an enemy?”

Vader sighed, and looked down at his half eaten meal. “I don’t know what I am any more, to tell you the truth. I have spent the past fifteen years in servitude to Sidious, and until recently, believed that would be my lot in life. But then my life took an unexpected turn, and now I’m questioning everything I have lived my life by for so long.”

“You’re referring to your marriage to Senator Amidala, aren’t you?” Obi-Wan asked.

Vader nodded. “She has forced me to examine my life, and I don’t like what I see,” he replied. “What’s more, I have learned the truth about the manner in which I came to be in Sidious’ custody.”

“What do you mean?” Obi-Wan asked.

“During our honeymoon, Padmé and I went to Tatooine. While I was there I saw my mother. Apparently she has spent the past fifteen years not knowing if I was alive or dead. You see, there was no exchange of money as I’d been told. She did not give me away, or sell me; I was stolen from her.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “But... but why?” he asked. “Why would he go to such lengths to kidnap a four year old boy from an obscure planet in the Outer Rim? Why you?”

“It seems that he knew about me,” Vader replied. “I don’t know how, perhaps through the Force. You see I’ve always had certain abilities, unusual abilities, and he wanted those abilities to use for his own purposes.”

The Chosen One, Obi-Wan thought in amazement; *could he be the one spoken of in the Jedi prophecy?* “Curious,” he said at last. “Go on.”

“Once I found out that Sidious had been lying to me, that he’d put my mother through that hell, I decided that I’d had enough,” Vader explained.

“You mean you’re abandoning the Sith?” Obi-Wan asked. “Is that what you expect me to believe?”

“I don’t expect you to believe anything,” Vader replied. ‘All I know is I’ve taken enough abuse from him,’ he continued. “I won’t let him use me any longer, particularly now that he’s so close to realizing his ultimate plan.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “What ultimate plan is that?” he asked nervously.

“Sidious means to use the clone army to destroy the Jedi Order, Obi-Wan,” Vader replied. “That is why he pushed for it so strongly. And he used my marriage to Padmé to buy the time he needed to manipulate the Senate to give him the powers he needed to make sure that he got it.”

Obi-Wan stroked his beard thoughtfully as he considered Vader’s dire words. It made sense that as a Sith he would want the Jedi destroyed. It made sense that he would need an army to do so. What didn’t make sense was Vader. He was an anomaly it seemed, not truly a Sith, at least not any more, and yet far too dark to be even considered Jedi.

“What do you plan to do, then?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I plan to kill them both,” Vader replied without hesitation. “Dooku and Palpatine, both will die.”

Obi-Wan nodded.

“I have to admit that I’m...shocked,” Obi-Wan replied at last. ‘And more than a little unnerved. Palpatine has been under our noses all this time and we didn’t know it. And you have been a member of the Jedi Council, and a sith all this time,’ he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe how blind we’ve been.”

“He had me there to keep an eye on you,” Vader explained. “He doesn’t trust you, he never has. He’s only been using you, do you see that? He’s been biding his time until he got his army. And now that he does, he will crush Dooku and the separatists, with the help of the Jedi, and then he will turn the clones on the Jedi. You will have served your purpose and he will eliminate you all.”

“With your help?” Obi-Wan asked pointedly.

Vader frowned. “Would I be telling you this if I planned on helping him?” he asked in exasperation. ‘I know you have no reason to trust me, given the fact that I’m technically a Sith,’ he said. “But I...”

Vader stopped when he noticed Obi-Wan looking behind him. He knew who was there before he even turned to see for himself.

“You’re a Sith??” Windu asked in horrified disbelief.

Vader stood up and turned around to face the Jedi Master. "Yes....and no," he replied.

Windu frowned. "You either are or you aren't," he replied tersely. He looked at Kenobi. "What's going on?" he asked.

Obi-Wan looked up at Windu, and then at Vader. "I'm not entirely sure," he admitted. "However it seems there's more to this young man than we realized," he added.

"Is he a Sith or isn't he?" Windu asked. "Don't give me any nonsense about maybe or maybe not; he is or he isn't."

Vader was surprised by the way Windu was speaking to his colleague, and decided to step in. He took his lightsaber off of his belt and ignited it. "Maybe this will help you decide," he said, looking Windu in the eye.

Windu took a step back and moved his hand to the hilt of his own weapon, half expecting Vader to engage him in a duel. But when Vader turned off his own weapon, Windu relaxed, but only marginally.

"Lieutenant," Windu said, signaling a nearby clone.

The clone came over at once.

"Take this man to the brig," Windu said, igniting his lightsaber.

At this Obi-Wan stood up. "Master Windu, this man saved my life down there," he protested.

Windu looked at him. "So? He's a Sith! He can't be trusted!"

"If he couldn't be trusted, he would have let me die down there," Obi-Wan protested. "And he certainly never would have told me what he just has. Sit down, Master Windu, you need to hear this."

Windu narrowed his eyes and looked once more at Vader. He sat down, not yet dismissing the clone trooper. "What is it that I need to hear?" he asked.

Vader and Obi-Wan sat down once more, Vader keeping his eyes on Windu, his dislike for him increasing by the minute.

"The Sith Lord we've been looking for," Obi-Wan said, "it's Chancellor Palpatine."

Windu's eyes widened in shock. "Palpatine is a Sith Lord??"

Vader nodded. "Yes he is," he replied calmly.

"And what's more, he has an elaborate plan to destroy the Jedi," Obi-Wan replied. "And if we don't stop him, he will do just that, using the army he now has to help him do it."

Windu looked at Vader. "Why are you telling us this if you are his apprentice?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because I want to stop him," Vader replied. "I want him to pay for fifteen years of abuse. Because I don't want to raise my children in a galaxy of his making."

Windu was somewhat taken aback by Vader's statement, and looked at Kenobi. "What is all this about?" he asked.

"A very long and rather tragic story, Master Windu," Kenobi replied, looking at Vader. "Perhaps Vader ought to be the one to tell you," he added.

Vader looked at Windu, sensing that the man was only listening begrudgingly. And yet, perhaps once he knew the whole story he would be more open minded.

Windu listened while Vader related the events of his life, of how he'd been stolen from his mother, how he'd been abused and trained as a Sith, how he'd found out the truth and was now determined to put a stop to Palpatine before it was too late. The Jedi Master was silent for a long time after Vader had finished his narrative, and then finally spoke.

"I'd like to speak with Master Kenobi alone," he told Vader.

Vader nodded. "I'll go contact my wife," he said, standing up. He looked briefly at Obi-Wan and then walked away.

Windu waited until Vader was out of ear shot before he spoke. "I don't like this, Obi-Wan," he said. "I'm not sure trusting this man is a good idea. He's been trained a Sith, he's known nothing else for years. He doesn't know anything different."

"But that isn't his fault," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"Perhaps not, but that doesn't make it any less true," Windu countered.

Obi-Wan frowned in frustration. "The young man is trying to change," he said. "That is clear. Why else would he be telling us all this? Why else would he have saved my life?"

"I don't know," Windu replied. "But..."

"And what's more, the man is clearly in love with his wife," Kenobi continued. "Is a Sith capable of that?"

"Is it love or lust he feels?" Windu countered.

Obi-Wan sighed, growing frustrated. "Master Windu, with all respect, you are being very closed minded."

Windu was surprised by Obi-Wan's statement, and said nothing for a moment.

"There is also something else we must consider," Obi-Wan said.

"And what is that?"

"Is it possible that this young man is the Chosen One?" Obi-Wan asked.

This was the last thing that Windu had expected Obi-Wan to say and he was rendered speechless for a moment. "What would make you ask that?" he asked.

"The manner in which Palpatine found him," Obi-Wan replied. 'His own innate abilities,' he continued. "The fact that he wants to destroy the Sith," he concluded. He said nothing for a moment, waiting for Windu to reply. When he did not, he continued. "Perhaps we ought to test his medichloridan count," he suggested tentatively.

After a moment, Windu nodded. "I suppose that would be acceptable," he said. "Although personally I think you're way off, Obi-Wan," he added.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Perhaps," he admitted. "But if I'm not, then we need to know."

"Yes, that's true," Windu acknowledged. "Very well, let's do this before we are embroiled in the battle that's heading our way. And then we'll decide what to do with this Vader of yours."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Thank you, Master Windu," he replied. "I don't think you'll regret it."

500 Republica Boulevard— Coruscant

Padmé was in a light sleep when the sound of the commscreen in her bedroom woke her up. At once she jumped out of bed and hurried over to the comm., seating herself before it and activating the screen. She smiled when she saw the face of her husband within a few seconds.

"Hello Senator," Vader said. "I hope I didn't wake you up."

Padmé nodded. "You did," she told him. They had decided that it was highly likely that Palpatine would be monitoring their communications during their separation, and so they were very careful not to say anything incriminating. "How are things going?"

"Well, interesting, to say the least," Vader replied. 'The information was correct,' he told her. "The Trade Federation is here in huge numbers waiting to take possession of a droid army."

Padmé was unnerved to hear it, particularly considering her past involvement with the Trade Federation. "That's rather unsettling," she said at last.

Vader nodded. "It is," he agreed. "But we'll deal with them. Ships are on their way here right now."

"Good," Padmé replied, pushing a stray tendril of hair from her face. She wished she could tell him how she truly felt, how much she missed him, how afraid she was for him. "Any idea when this will be over?"

"No," he replied. "It's impossible to say."

Padmé nodded in understanding, not needing to say how she felt for Vader could feel it clearly even light years away. He wanted to reassure her, but knew it was too dangerous to speak the words that were in his heart.

I miss you, he thought, hoping she would be able to pick up his mental contact.

Padmé nodded, and he knew that she'd heard him.

"I have to go," Vader said at last. "I'll be in touch."

"Okay," she replied softly, her eyes threatening to tear over. "Good luck," she added after a moment's hesitation.

Vader merely nodded, and then ended the transmission. He sat for a moment, the fatigue he'd been fighting for the past twenty four hours starting to kick in. But he had no time for

sleep now; there was too much going on, too much about to happen. He stood up to leave the comm. Station and turned to see Obi-Wan approaching him.

“Well?” he asked simply.

“We want to do a medichlorian count,” Obi-Wan told him.

Vader frowned. “A what?” he asked.

Obi-Wan smiled. “I’ll explain as we walk,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 32

Chapter 32

"Medichlorians are microscopic organisms that live in the bloodstream of every sentient being," Obi-Wan explained as the two men walked to the medical wing. "They are what give us the ability to use the Force. The higher the concentration in a being's bloodstream, the greater their ability to use the Force."

"I see," Vader replied. "And you want to see if I have any of these... medichlorians in my blood?" he asked.

Obi-Wan nodded. "You have them, my friend, I promise you," he said. "Everyone does. But from what you've told me, I have to wonder how many you have. The blood test won't take long to yield results."

Vader thought this was something of a waste of time, but said nothing. He felt indebted to Obi-Wan for his defense of him earlier. What's more, he felt something for the man he'd never felt towards another being: friendship. It was a feeling he liked, and he again realized why his wife had placed her trust in Kenobi.

"Have a seat," the medical droid instructed Vader as the two men entered the medical bay.

Vader sat down and watched as the droid took out a hypodermic needle. On the far side of the room Mace Windu stood, arms folded over his chest, his expression inscrutable. Vader, however, could feel the man's veiled hostility, and his skepticism. Still, he had not placed Vader in the brig, yet, so perhaps all was not lost.

"That should do it," the droid reported after pricking the end of one of Vader's fingers. He took the blood sample to small device that Obi-Wan had provided and inserted the sample at once. Obi-Wan and Windu walked over to watch as the results came up on the small screen, while Vader merely waited, not really knowing what to expect.

After a few moments, the two Jedi looked at one another and then over at Vader.

"There has to be some mistake," Windu said, looking back at the results. "That reading can't be correct!"

Obi-Wan looked again too. "I've never seen anything like it," he said quietly. "Even Master Yoda's readings aren't this high; not even close!"

Finally Vader's curiosity got the better of him and he stood up and walked over to them. "What is it? What's going on?"

Obi-Wan looked up at him. "According to this, your count is off the scale," he said.

Vader frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means you have the highest count ever known to any being," Obi-Wan continued. "Higher than any Jedi ever tested."

Vader was shocked by this news and looked at Mace Windu, who was regarding Vader with renewed, albeit, cautious interest. "So what does that prove, then?" he asked. "Does it really prove anything?"

"It might," Windu said.

Vader frowned. "What do you mean?"

But before Windu could elaborate, a clone signaled Windu on his comlink.

Master Windu, the ships have made contact. They'll be here in twenty minutes.

"Acknowledged," Windu said. He looked at Obi-Wan and then back at Vader. 'I suppose we'll have to believe that you won't betray us down there, Vader,' he said. "Obi-Wan here seems to have faith in you, so I suppose that will have to be good enough for me."

Vader merely nodded, not trusting himself to say something that wasn't tinged with sarcasm at this point.

"Do you remember your name?" Obi-Wan asked Vader. "The name you were given by your parents when you were born?"

"I only had one parent," Vader told him. "Just a mother, no father," he continued.

"What do you mean, no father?" Windu asked suspiciously.

"That's just what my mother told me," Vader explained. "She claims that one day she just became pregnant with me. There was no father involved."

Obi-Wan and Windu exchanged a look of significance at this disclosure.

"And I do remember my name," Vader continued. "My wife won't use my sith name now that she knows it," he added with a smile.

"What is it?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Skywalker," Vader replied. "Anakin Skywalker."

Obi-Wan nodded, deciding the name suited him well. "Well gentlemen," he said, addressing them both. "We have a battle to prepare for."

"Yes we do," Windu agreed. "Let's get to it then, the fleet will be here soon."

Coruscant-Office of Senator Amidala

"Thank you Jar Jar," Padmé said. "That's all for now."

"Very good m'lady," the gungan replied, bowing elaborately.

Padmé sat down at her desk and picked up the datapad that Jar Jar had delivered. She was having a very hard time concentrating on the task at hand, for her mind kept returning to the battle that was no doubt under way on Geonosis. The worry she felt was all consuming, filling her with a sense of cold dread unlike any she had ever known.

"Good morning, Milady."

Padmé looked up, startled by the voice. She was even more startled when she saw who was standing in her doorway: Chancellor Palpatine.

“Good morning, Chancellor,” she replied, using the techniques that her husband had been teaching her in an attempt to shield her mind from him. “What brings you by at this hour?”

Palpatine smiled. “May I?” he asked, indicating one of the chairs before her desk.

“Of course,” she replied, a feeling of uneasiness filling her.

Palpatine sat down, the benevolent smile never leaving his face. “So tell me, Senator, how is married life?” he asked.

Padmé was surprised by his question, and knew he was trying to trap her. “As good as can be expected,” she replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” he replied, running one finger along the top of her desk slowly. “You see I’m not as gullible as you might think.”

Padmé frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Palpatine pulled out a small holographic display device from his cloak and set it on the table. “You may be interested in these images,” he told her, reaching over and activating the device.

Padmé watched in silent horror as the images of she and her husband on their honeymoon appeared: on the beach, dancing, the love and desire between them obvious.

“It seems you and Lord Vader have grown quite close,” he remarked. “And that he has disregarded my orders regarding...physical intimacy.”

Padmé looked up at him, having trouble keeping her anger and hatred in check. “A rather unrealistic demand to place on anyone, don’t you think?” she asked coldly.

Palpatine shrugged. “Perhaps for some,” he replied. “But not for a Sith.”

“If you felt that way why did you allow him to marry me in the first place?” she demanded. “Or were you just hoping that he would disobey you so you’d have another reason to punish him?”

Palpatine only smiled. “I’m glad you asked me that, actually,” he replied. ‘I allowed him to marry you in order to keep you in check,’ he told her. “It was actually his idea,” he continued. “He promised me that he would keep you away from the capital long enough for the fate of my army to be ensured,” he told her. “And as it turned out, his plan worked out perfectly.”

Padmé narrowed her eyes. “I don’t believe you for a moment,” she told him. “I know it was your idea, and I know that he knew nothing of your ruthless manipulation of the Senate.”

Palpatine only continued to smile. “Oh let me guess,” he said. ‘You think that he loves you, don’t you?’ he asked. And then he laughed. “The man isn’t capable of it, Senator; he may use your body for his own physical gratification, but love? Please!” he laughed again.

Padmé watched as the man laughed at her, knowing that he was lying, and yet feeling the sting of his words. “Are you finished?” she asked.

Palpatine stopped laughing, annoyed by her ability to see through his lies. “Not quite,” he snapped, angry that his plans had been foiled. His eyes glowed yellow as they bore into her. “I do have one last... request to make of you.”

“What is that?” she asked warily, unnerved by the sinister appearance his face had taken on.

“I want you to leave Vader,” he told her. “No, I insist that you do. This marriage has served its purpose, and now it’s time for it to end.”

“You must be joking,” she replied.

“Oh I’m quite serious,” he replied.

“And if I refuse?” she asked, surprising him with her courage.

Palpatine narrowed his eyes. “If you refuse, I will see to it that you live to see every member of your family eradicated,” he told her coldly.

“You wouldn’t!” she cried. “You’d never get away with it!”

He smiled. “Please, Senator,” he said mockingly. “You know better than that. And if you doubt my resolve, simply ask your beloved husband about the imprudence of crossing me.”

Padmé felt a chill go down her spine as she remembered the many times her husband had awoken in terror reliving past beatings by his master. “Monster,” she spat.

“Monster? No, simply an opportunist,” he replied mildly. “I have a way of making things happen, Senator, perhaps you’ve noticed,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé shook her head, suddenly feeling as though she was in the presence of madness.

“In addition,” he continued, “should you refuse to obey my wishes, Vader will be the first to die. I had originally planned on killing you for his disobedience; but as I see it, this will be a greater punishment.”

Padmé stared at him, unable to grasp the level of evil that he was capable of. “You would rather see him dead than happy?” she asked him. “Is that it?”

“You are beginning to get the picture, aren’t you?” he said, standing up. “You have already contaminated him enough, Senator. I won’t allow him to be further weakened by association with you. So if you truly do love him as you claim to, leave him. Tell him whatever you want, only make it clear that your marriage is over. If not, he and everyone else you love will die, I promise you.”

Padmé looked up at him. “You’re insane,” she said quietly.

Palpatine smiled. “I’m glad we understand one another, Lady Vader,” he said and then turned and left.

Padmé sat for a moment, her hands trembling with anger. She knew that no matter how she might feel, however, that she had no choice but to obey. She knew Palpatine well enough to know that he didn’t make idle threats. If he threatened to kill Vader, then he would do it without compunction. *I can’t let that happen*, she thought resolutely. *Even if it means losing him, I can’t let the ones I love die.*

Standing up Padmé came to a decision. Willing herself not to let the situation render her hysterical, she packed up a few things and left the office.

Geonosis

The clones were proving to be every bit as lethal as promised, and the situation was well under within a short time. Swarming over the red rock of the planet surface, the sea of white armored clones was no match for the Geonosians who fell in their wake. The droid army, however, was another matter.

The Jedi had made it their task to capture the separatists, with the intention of forcing them to shut down the vast droid army. The unsuspecting separatists were relatively easy to capture, taken unawares as they were. However, there was one who was conspicuously absent, and that was Count Dooku.

"I will find him," Vader told the Jedi as the separatists were taken into custody. "He can't be allowed to get away."

"I'll come with you," Obi-Wan offered.

"No," Vader replied. "This is my battle, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan didn't want to argue to point, but at the same time he knew that Dooku was a formidable enemy for anyone. He watched as Vader left, and then decided to follow.

Count Dooku had sensed the imminent attack of the clone army, and had already made plans for his own getaway. He wasn't terribly concerned about his comrades; he had their money, he had their clones. As far as he was concerned they were on their own at this point.

"Your speeder is ready, sir," Dooku's aide de camp informed him as he entered the large hangar bay.

"Very good," Dooku replied as he walked to the small one man speeder bike. He climbed on board and started up the bike, which lifted off the deck easily. But then it stopped, as though grabbed by some invisible hand. He hit the accelerator, revving the engine for all it was worth, but it made no difference. He turned the engine off, and climbed off. And it was then that he sensed a familiar presence nearby.

"Going somewhere, Lord Tyrannous?"

Dooku turned to see a young man of about twenty standing in the hangar, staring at him with eyes the glowed yellow. In his hand he held the red blade of the Sith. There was only one person this could be.

"Darth Vader," Dooku said. "We meet again at last."

Vader nodded and approached him. "Yes, at last," he agreed. "At last I will have my revenge."

Dooku smiled. "You will try, boy," he replied, producing his own weapon. "But you forget who it was who taught you everything you know."

"Not quite everything," Vader replied, lunging at the old man quickly.

Dooku was surprised by the younger man's strength and smiled grimly. "I've been looking forward to this," he taunted.

Vader frowned. "My powers have doubled since you last saw me, Tyrannous," he warned. "I'm not the frightened boy you took such delight in tormenting."

"Perhaps not," Dooku acknowledged. "But you're still a boy, nonetheless," he taunted, pushing Vader's blade back with his own.

Vader smiled. "So why are you so scared, then?" he asked. "I can see it in your eyes, and in your black heart," he declared.

Dooku frowned, not liking the way things were turning out. Vader was far stronger than he'd anticipated, and he was beginning to worry that he may actually be bested by him.

Vader could sense the old man's fatigue as well as his fear, and he continued to press his advantage. Flipping over Dooku easily, he used the Force to push the old man forward, and Dooku stumbled to his knees, his weapon skittering across the room. Vader then walked around him, watching his foe with grim satisfaction as he struggled to catch his breath. Bringing Dooku's weapon to his left hand, Vader stood before the fallen Sith, two red blades poised at his throat.

"Now wait just a minute," Dooku said, thinking fast. "Join me, Vader. We could destroy Sidious, and together we could take control of the galaxy! With my droid army and the clone army, we'd be unstoppable!"

Vader smirked. "I don't need you, old man," he said, taking a step closer. 'Besides, I wouldn't trust you further than I could throw your decrepit old carcass,' he added bitterly. "I've learned the truth about that day on Tatooine, Tyrannous. I know you stole me from my mother, I know how she's suffered all these years because of it. And now you'll pay for that," he concluded grimly.

With one quick movement of his own blade, Vader lopped off Dooku's right arm up to the elbow. "That's for my mother," he told him as Dooku screamed in pain. Next he did the same thing to Dooku's left arm. "That's for me," Vader told him. Dooku was nearly delirious in pain, but was helpless to stop Vader's attack.

"No, please!" he pleaded as Vader brought the two blades to his throat.

Vader looked down at him, the hatred he felt filling him. "Why should I show you any mercy?" he snarled. "Did you show me any? Did you ever once offer me comfort when I was alone and afraid? I was a child!"

"I had no choice!" cried Dooku. "He would have killed me had I disobeyed, you know that!"

Vader nodded. "Yes, I know," he replied. "But that doesn't mean I forgive you," he added, raising his hands.

"Anakin no!"

Vader froze, the sound of his birth name shocking him. Dooku was also shocked, and looked over to see Obi-Wan Kenobi running over.

“Don’t kill him,” Obi-Wan said, looking down at Dooku.

“He deserves to die for what he has done,” Vader replied, not taking his eyes from Dooku. “He’s a monster! Can’t you see that?”

“Perhaps he is,” Obi-Wan replied calmly. “But if you are ever to abandon the Dark Side, you must start somewhere. Showing mercy is a good place to start.”

Vader frowned, knowing that what Kenobi said was true, but finding letting go of his revenge very difficult.

“Think of Padmé,” Kenobi continued, knowing exactly where to strike.

Vader glanced up at Kenobi, resenting his manipulation. “Don’t bring her into this,” he growled. “This has nothing to do with her!”

“Yes it does,” Obi-Wan replied. “If you think about it, you’ll see I’m right.”

Dooku was watching the exchange nervously, perspiring profusely as he awaited his fate.

Finally, to both Dooku and Kenobi’s surprise, Vader lowered his blades. “Take him away before I change my mind,” he said.

Dooku slowly stood up where he was taken into custody by Obi-Wan who escorted him towards the exit. Vader watched, not entirely sure he was doing the right thing. He continued to watch until the two men had almost reached the exit, and then heard the sound of metal ripping. He looked up and saw an enormous steel pipe heading straight for Obi-Wan, who had noticed it as well.

“Look out!” Vader shouted as Obi-Wan turned to deflect the projectile with his weapon. Dooku took the opportunity to make a run for it, reasoning that being free even with no arms was better than being in prison. Vader, however, was not about to let this happen. He took Dooku’s lightsaber and sent it spinning across the room where it landed squarely in the fleeing man’s back. Dooku stopped at once, and then crumpled to the floor, dead.

Obi-Wan looked at the dead Count, and then up at Vader. “Seems you were right about him,” he said.

Vader nodded. “Of course I was,” he replied. “I guess you owe me twice now, don’t you?” he added with a hint of a smile.

Obi-Wan nodded. “I suppose I do,” he replied. “You know we still need to find a way to shut down the droid army,” he said.

Vader frowned. “Oh yeah,” he said. “You think maybe he could have told us?”

“Undoubtedly,” Kenobi replied as they walked out of the hangar.

Vader sighed. “Well... the Trade Federation,” he said. “They’ll know.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, probably,” he admitted. “Let’s go see if you’re right.”

Vader cocked an eyebrow. “I was right about Dooku, wasn’t I?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan replied. “That’s rather irrelevant, though, don’t you think?”

Vader frowned again. "You just don't want to admit that you were wrong and I was right."

"I never said any such thing."

"No, but you were thinking it."

Obi-Wan looked at the young man with an amused expression. "Are you always this sure of yourself?" he asked.

Vader smiled. "Not all the time," he said. "Only when I'm right."

Obi-Wan stopped in his tracks, watching as Vader walked ahead. And then he followed him with a shake of his head.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33

500 Republica Boulevard— Coruscant

Padmé closed the last of her suitcases, and wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hands. Dormé was with her, helping in any way she could. She did not fully understand why her lady was leaving the man she'd come to fall so deeply in love with, and yet felt it imprudent to question her at this point.

"I guess that's it," Padmé said. "Let's be off."

"If this is what you want, Milady," Dormé replied.

Padmé looked at her. "No, it isn't what I want," she replied. "But I have no choice, Dormé. Let's go."

Dormé didn't understand what Padmé meant, but followed her dutifully, deciding that Padmé would tell her in her own time.

Captain Typho was waiting on the large landing platform behind the apartment complex, having readied Padmé's cruiser for the voyage. He took Padmé's bags from Dormé and carried them on board. Padmé turned around and looked up at the building one last time.

"We'll be back, won't we, Milady?" Dormé asked tentatively.

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she replied. "Eventually. But for now we're going home. I need to go home," she added quietly, turning to Dormé, the tears filling her eyes again.

Dormé nodded, and linked her arm through Padmé's. "Come on," Dormé said. "Let's get on board."

Republican Transport Ship — Geonosis System

"They won't talk," Ki-Adi Mundi reported as Obi-Wan and Vader entered the detention block.

"What do you mean they won't talk?" Vader asked.

"Just what I said," the Jedi replied. "They refuse to shut down the droids and refuse to tell us how."

Vader frowned. "I can make them talk," he declared, walking past the Jedi.

Mundi looked at Kenobi questioningly. "Who does he think he is?" he asked.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Relax, Master Mundi," he said. "He knows what he's doing." Obi-Wan followed Vader into the cell block where the remaining separatists were being held.

"Dooku is dead," Vader began. "And our troops are hunting down General Grievous even as we speak. Your treacherous rebellion is over."

The separatists looked at one another nervously.

"We understand you are refusing to cooperate," Obi-Wan commented. "That is unacceptable."

"We don't owe you anything, Jedi," Nute Gunray spoke up. "If you think we're going to hand over our droid army to you, you've got another thing coming, Kenobi."

Vader didn't have near the amount of patience as his Jedi counterpart, and took his lightsaber into his hand. Obi-Wan saw him and gave him a look of warning.

"So you remember me, Viceroy," Obi-Wan said with a smile. "I'm flattered."

"Of course," Gunray replied. "I have never forgotten how you helped that slut from Naboo to destroy our efforts to annex that wretched little planet."

That was all Vader needed to hear. In an instant the tip of his red blade was millimeters from Gunray's throat. "You will not speak of her in that manner again," he warned angrily.

Gunray looked at Vader, startled by his sudden vehemence.

"Now, tell us how to shut down the droid army," Vader said, enjoying the fear he felt issuing forth from the nemoidian.

"And if I refuse?" Gunray had the audacity to ask.

Vader looked briefly at the man beside him, a fellow nemoidian, and sliced the man's head off with one quick swipe of his blade. Gunray couldn't help but give a gasp of horror at seeing his long time comrade struck down in cold blood. Vader looked back at him, bringing his blade back to his throat. "Any more questions?" he asked.

Gunray was momentarily flummoxed, and said nothing. "I...I'll tell you what you want to know," he stammered at last.

Vader smiled. "I knew you'd see things my way," he said with smug satisfaction. He turned to Obi-Wan, expecting him to be pleased with the successful interrogation, but saw instead a look of dismay on his face.

"Something wrong?" he asked as he and Obi-Wan left the room, Gunray being escorted by two clones behind them.

"No," Obi-Wan replied.

"You don't approve of my methods," Vader stated.

"No," Obi-Wan admitted.

"We got the results we wanted, didn't we?" Vader replied.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Yes, I suppose we did," he agreed.

Vader shook his head, and then had an idea. He turned back to the clones. "While you're at it, you can tell us where to find Grievous too," he told Gunray. "He'll be keeping you company in the spice mines, Viceroy."

Gunray said nothing, knowing better than to question Vader again.

Naboo

Jobal and Ruwee Naberrie had just sat down to dinner when they heard the back door open. They looked up at one another in surprise, and expected to see their daughter Sola enter with their granddaughters. But when their younger daughter, Padmé and her handmaiden, Dormé, entered the room, both rose to their feet in surprise.

“Padmé!” Jobal exclaimed. “What a surprise!”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?” Ruwee said as he embraced his daughter.

“I didn’t know I was coming until this morning,” Padmé replied.

Jobal hugged her next, knowing at once that something was wrong. She pulled back and looked into Padmé’s face. “What’s going on?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

Padmé wasn’t surprised that her mother knew that she was upset; she’d never been able to hide her true feelings from her. “I’ve left him, Mom,” she said quietly, her eyes filling with tears. “I’ve left my husband.”

Jobal’s eyes widened in surprise. “What?? Why?? What has happened?”

Padmé sighed. “It’s a long story,” she said. “I hardly know where to begin,” she added sadly.

Ruwee frowned, his paternal instinct telling him at once that it was Vader who was in the wrong. “Come in and sit down, both of you,” he said. “And tell us everything.”

Padmé nodded, and let her father lead her into the dining room where she took a seat.

“It’s the Chancellor,” Padmé told her parents after taking a moment to gather her thoughts. “He told me that if I don’t leave Vader, he will kill him, as well as everyone else that I love, including you.”

Jobal and Ruwee exchanged a look of alarm. “Why would he do such a thing?” Jobal asked.

“Because he is a hateful, evil man who cares for no one and only wants to control others,” Padmé replied.

“Does Vader know about this?” Ruwee asked.

Padmé shook her head. “No, he’s away on a mission,” she explained. “I can’t tell him, if I do, Palpatine will find out. And if he does...”

“Palpatine will follow through with his threats,” Jobal finished.

“Surely Vader can defend himself against that old man,” Ruwee said. “And as for us...”

“You don’t understand,” Padmé interjected. ‘He has an army at his disposal now,’ she explained, “He’s a very powerful man, Dad. I wouldn’t dream of putting you or Anakin in that danger.”

“Anakin?” Jobal asked.

“That’s Vader’s real name,” Padmé explained. “Anakin Skywalker,” she said dreamily.

Jobal and Ruwee looked at one another, having no idea what to say to their daughter at this point.

"You know that Vader will undoubtedly try to find you," Jobal said. "If he loves you, he won't stand for this, Padmé."

Padmé nodded. "I know," she replied. "But I have to make him believe that I mean this, that I'm truly leaving him. That's the only way that he will be safe. That's the only way that Palpatine will leave us all alone. You mustn't say anything to him either," she told her parents. "No matter what. Promise me you won't."

Against their better judgment, Jobal and Ruwee made the promise that Dormé had already made hours earlier en route to Naboo. They knew their daughter well enough to know that she was firm in her belief that she was doing the right thing. However, they had to wonder what her husband's reaction would be, and whether Padmé would be strong enough to withstand it.

Later that evening...

"Milady? May I come in?"

"Yes of course," Padmé replied.

Dormé entered the room and looked over to see Padmé sitting at her dressing table brushing out her long hair as part of her bed time ritual.

"How are you doing?" Dormé asked her, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Padmé glanced at her in the mirror. "I'm okay," she replied.

Dormé frowned. "No you're not," she replied. "Surely this will be temporary," she said. "Right? You said yourself that Vader means to kill the chancellor."

Padmé sighed as she recommenced her brushing. "I hope so," she replied. "But I don't know for sure, Dormé. He may not forgive me for leaving him," she added quietly.

"Oh Milady," Dormé said, standing up and coming over to Padmé. "Surely he'll understand when you explain it to him."

"Assuming he gives me a chance," Padmé replied. She looked at her reflection in the mirror.

"Of course he will," Dormé assured her. "He loves you very much! Why wouldn't he listen?"

Padmé sighed as she set her brush down on the dressing table. "I don't know," she said tiredly. "All I know is that I miss Ani," she said quietly as her tears began again. "And the thought of telling him our marriage is over is tearing me apart," she concluded covering her face with her hands as she wept finally.

Dormé wrapped her arms around her in an attempt to comfort her, not knowing what anyone could say to do so at this point.

Republican Transport— Geonosis System

Where in the name of all that is holy did she learn how to do this?? Vader thought as he virtually melted under his wife's skilled hands. She was kneading the muscle between his shoulder blades, and had turned him into a veritable puddle of goo with her expert touch.

"Does that feel okay?" she asked, bending forward and whispering into his ear.

"Uh huh," he muttered into the pillow.

Padmé smiled and went back to work. She was seated on his lower back, working her hands over his shoulders and between them, trying to ease out the tension that his meeting with Palpatine had set there. And so far she was doing an admirable job. But she had more in store for her husband, far more.

"Where did you learn to do this?" Vader asked.

"My grandmother," Padmé told him, working her small fingers into one shoulder. "She was a healer. She taught me and Sola, as well as our mother."

"Be sure to thank her for me next time you see her," Vader said with a dreamy smile.

Padmé laughed. "Well perhaps you can do that yourself next time we're on Naboo," she suggested.

Vader merely nodded, and allowed her hands to carry him off into a different plane of reality, at least for a little while.

Padmé moved lower along his back, stopping for a moment when she caught sight of the scars on his broad back. She frowned, thinking of how he'd obtained them, hating the men who'd given them to him.

Vader could sense what she was feeling, and suddenly became self conscious. "That was wonderful, Senator, thank you," he said, starting to turn. Padmé climbed off of his back and allowed him to move onto his side. She lay beside him, facing him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Vader frowned. "Sorry??" he said. "What do you mean?"

"The scars," she said. "I'm so sorry they did that to you."

Vader sighed. "Don't be," he said. "It was a long time ago. I don't even know they're there anymore," he lied.

Padmé nodded, not really believing him, but sensing that he was uncomfortable talking about this with her just yet. "You know the massage isn't quite finished yet," she told him with a smile.

"Oh?" he said. "You mean there's more?"

Padmé nodded, moving over to him and pushing him onto his back. "Yes, much more," she told him.

"More tricks of your grandmother?" he asked with a smile.

Padmé shook her head. "Oh no," she assured him. "This is all mine," she told him, drawing the tips of her fingers down the front of his body.

Vader's smile grew. "I see now what you mean," he quipped...

Vader's lovely dream was rudely interrupted by the sound of his comlink. He had been sleeping so deeply that he was discombobulated for a moment, and then, getting his bearings, sat up in the small bed.

"Yes?" he asked sleepily.

I'm sorry to wake you, Obi-Wan's voice was heard to say, but I thought you might want to know that Grievous has been apprehended.

"Good," Vader replied. "Does that mean we can go home now?"

Obi-Wan chuckled. *Yes, I do believe so.*

Vader smiled, and then lay back down again, hoping to pick up where his dream had been so rudely interrupted.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34

Chapter 34

Naboo

“Are you sure that this is what you want?” Jobal asked.

“Yes,” Padmé said. ‘I’ve always been able to think better up there,’ she told her parents. They had brought her to the port where she would embark upon the boat voyage to the Lake District. “I need some time to think through all this,” she added.

Ruwee and Jobal knew their daughter well enough to realize that she seldom changed her mind when she’d decided upon a course of action.

“And if your husband shows up looking for you?” Ruwee asked. “Because I’m sure he’s bound to, Padmé.”

“I know,” she replied. “I will have to face him sooner or later, Dad. There’s no avoiding it.”

Ruwee nodded, wishing he had a solution to offer his daughter. “Here comes the gondola,” he told her.

Padmé turned to watch as the boat approached. *I’m doing the right thing*, she kept telling herself; *I’m doing the only thing I can do*.

“Keep in touch while you’re up here,” Jobal said, hugging Padmé warmly.

“I will,” she replied.

“Let us know if you need anything,” Ruwee added, hugging her next.

Padmé nodded, and then walked over to the edge of the dock where Dormé stood as the gondola pulled up. It had been almost a week now since she had seen her husband. She’d heard on the holonet that the mission to Geonosis had been a success, and so she was confident that Vader was safe. But that didn’t make her feel any better.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” Padmé said as the boatman helped her into the gondola.

Ruwee and Jobal nodded and watched as Padmé took a seat in the gondola beside her loyal handmaiden and friend.

“We can’t let this continue,” Jobal said.

Ruwee looked at his wife. “You promised her you wouldn’t say anything to Vader,” he reminded her.

“I know,” Jobal reminded, her eyes fixed on Padmé as she disappeared into the horizon. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t tell him where to find her.”

Ruwee looked at her with a frown. "Jobal, you're interfering where you have no business," he told her.

"I disagree," she replied as they started back to their vehicle. "This is my daughter we're talking about. And she's hurting. She thinks she's making the right decision, but she's not. If anyone can make her see that it's her husband."

Coruscant

Almost a week had passed since Vader had seen Coruscant; almost a week since he had seen his wife. With the clones working all over the galaxy to destroy the now deactivated droid army, the Jedi had returned to the capital to report to the Chancellor.

Vader had fully expected that the Jedi would arrest Palpatine immediately upon arriving at the capital; but, true to form, they wanted to check out Vader's story. Ki-Adi Mundi and Mace Windu had left for Tatooine, while Obi-Wan and Vader had gone directly to the office of the Chancellor to make their report.

Palpatine looked up from his report when the two men entered his office. He gave them a benevolent smile.

"I commend you both on a successful mission," he said.

"Thank you your Excellency," Obi-Wan said, bowing slightly. "I feel it is safe to say that the clones will have General Grievous here to face trial with the other separatists within the week."

"Excellent," Palpatine replied. "And once the Separatist threat has been completely eradicated, it will pave the way to a new era of peace in the Republic."

Vader looked at Palpatine, fighting with all that he had to hide his true feelings. *New era of peace?? Is that what you call genocide?* "I'm sure we are all looking forward to that, sir," he said instead.

Palpatine looked up at his apprentice, the smile not leaving his face. "Yes, we are," he said. "I'm quite sure you are anxious to see your dear wife, Lord Vader," he said, his smile growing. "You are free to do so now if you wish."

Vader was somewhat surprised at Palatine's suggestion and simply nodded in response. "Thank you, Chancellor," he replied. "I will go at once to inform the Senator of our successful mission."

Obi-Wan sensed the tension between the two men but said nothing, not wanting to give away the Jedi's upper hand. He left the room with Vader and remained silent until they boarded the lift.

"That was peculiar, don't you think?" he said.

Vader looked at him and nodded. "Yes," he agreed. 'Rather.' He frowned. "I have a bad feeling, Obi-Wan," he said. "I don't know why, but I just do."

Obi-Wan said nothing, but he too felt a strange sense of foreboding. "Let's go see Padmé," he suggested. "Perhaps you're just missing her and that's what has you feeling out of sorts."

Vader nodded. "Well I certainly do miss her," he replied with a smile. "It will be wonderful to see her again after so long."

Obi-Wan laughed. "It's only been six days," he pointed out.

Vader shrugged. "Seems like a long time when you're away from the one you love," he commented.

Obi-Wan merely smiled in response.

The two men stepped off the lift on the floor where Padmé's office was located. They were met almost immediately by Jar Jar, who nearly had a conniption upon seeing Obi-Wan.

"Obi!!" the gungan squealed in excitement as he shook both of Obi-Wan's hands with great gusto. "Meesa so happy to be seein you!!"

Obi-Wan smiled broadly. "Hello Jar Jar," he replied. "How have you been? It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Jar Jar nodded emphatically. "Yessa, too long," he agreed fervently.

"Is Senator Amidala in her office?" Vader asked finally.

"No sir," Jar Jar replied. "Senator Padmé not been here for three days."

Vader frowned. "Three days?" he asked. "Why? Has she been on an assignment?"

"No sir," Jar Jar replied.

Vader grew alarmed. "Is she ill?"

Jar Jar shrugged. "Meesa don't knowin," he replied. 'She left after Chancellor Palpatine was here,' he added. "She was big time upset meesa thinks."

Vader looked at Obi-Wan in alarm, and then turned and ran back to the lift without another word. Obi-Wan let him go, and then returned his attention back to the gungan.

"Tell me everything you can about the Chancellor's visit with Senator Padmé," he asked.

Vader's heart was pounding in his chest as he raced his speeder towards home. *Three days? Since when does she even miss one day of work, let alone three??* He thought in panic.

Stopping the vehicle outside the apartment, he jumped out and onto the balcony.

"Padmé!" he called, running into the apartment. When he received no answer, his alarm began to morph into panic. "Padmé!!" he called, dashing from room to room.

There was no sign of her in any part of the apartment, nor was he even able to detect any trace of her presence in any of the rooms. She had been gone for more than twenty-four hours, and quite possibly the entire three that Jar Jar had mentioned. But where was she? And why had she left without leaving him any indication as to where she'd gone??

Fear began to blossom within him as he walked from room to room, trying to pick up any clues as to where she had gone. But the apartment, as usual, was utterly tidy, completely organized, with not a thing out of place. He stopped as a thought occurred to him, and he ran into their bedroom.

The bed was made, as it usually was during the day, but it wasn't the bed that he was focusing on. He headed straight for the enormous walk in closet that housed Padmé's massive wardrobe, as well as her set of luggage. Throwing open the doors to the closet, he took a quick inventory of the closet, and it was then that he noticed. Two pieces of her luggage was missing, as well as several outfits.

Vader frowned. She'd gone somewhere, but not for long. Jar Jar knew nothing of an assignment, which meant the trip wasn't work related, it was personal. But where would she go on such short notice without telling anyone, even her husband, where she'd gone? And then an idea struck him: Naboo. *Oh no, one of her parents... one of them must have taken ill*, he reasoned. That would explain the hasty nature of her departure, for there was not even a note or a message anywhere telling him where she'd gone.

Relief filled him as he left the closet, followed quickly by concern. No doubt Padmé had been frantic when she'd left, for he knew how close she was to her parents. No doubt she could use some moral support about now.

Making up his mind, Vader returned to the closet and found his own suitcase and brought it out to the bed. After tossing a few items of clothing and some personal items into it, he closed it up and left the bedroom. He didn't care if the Jedi were expecting him at the Council; he didn't care if Palpatine was expecting him. His wife needed him, and that was his first priority.

Leaving the apartment once more, Vader climbed back into his speeder and headed for the Jedi hangar where he'd left the Jedi Fighter he'd come to love and consider his own.

"Where are you going?"

Vader turned around to see Obi-Wan standing there, watching him with a curious expression.

"Padmé isn't at our apartment," he told him. "I'm going to Naboo."

"How do you know she's there?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Just a feeling," Vader replied, growing impatient. 'I'm going, in don't care if you approve or not, Obi-Wan.'

"You must do what you feel is right, of course," Obi-Wan replied. "I won't stand in your way."

Vader nodded, and then climbed into the fighter. Lifting off, he sped out of the hangar, setting course for Naboo, feeling certain that this was the right course of action.

Naboo

Vader arrived at Theed, and leased a land speeder to travel to the small village where his in-laws lived. He had never been to Naboo, but was enchanted by its beauty and tranquility. To him it seemed utterly fitting that this planet was the home of his beloved, for it was so like her.

Evening was falling when Vader arrived at the Naberrie home. He felt excited at the prospect of seeing his wife again, for the week apart from her had seemed like much longer.

Standing at the door, Vader looked up at the large stone house, imagining Padmé as a child playing here, picking flowers in the garden beyond the tall fence that surrounded the yard. Finally he knocked on the door, hoping that it would be Padmé who answered. After a few moments a man appeared at the door that Vader recognized as being Padmé's father, Ruwee Naberrie. He did not seem at all surprised to see his son-in-law standing at the door.

"Come in Vader," Ruwee said. "We've been expecting you."

Vader entered the house and followed Ruwee into the large front room. Jobal looked up from her reading when the two men entered the room.

"Good evening, Mrs. Naberrie," Vader said. "I've come to see my wife."

Jobal glanced over at her husband, making Vader nervous by her evasiveness. "She is here, isn't she?" he asked, an edge of alarm in his voice.

"No she's not," Ruwee said. "She's not here."

Vader turned to him with a frown. "But...she was here," he stated confidently. 'I can still feel her presence.' He looked back at Jobal. "Please tell me where she is!"

Jobal could not remain silent. "She was here," she said at last. "She left this morning."

"Where is she?" Vader asked again, his tone somewhat more demanding. 'I'll search all over the planet if I must,' he continued. "It would be far easier if you just told me where she is."

"She's up at the Lake Retreat," Jobal said after a moment's deliberation. Ignoring her husband's warning look, she went on to tell Vader exactly how to get to the Lake District and to their manor house up there.

"Thank you," Vader said simply, and then turned and started walking away.

"You won't find a boatman to take you up there at this hour," Ruwee called after him. "It's nearly dark outside."

Vader turned back and looked at his father-in-law. "Oh I'll manage," he said simply, and then turned again and left them.

Lake Retreat

"Milady, are you sure I can't get you anything to eat?" Dormé asked. "You barely touched your dinner."

"No, thank you Dormé," Padmé said. "I'm not hungry."

Dormé frowned. "You can't keep this up, Milady," she said. "If this is the decision you've made, you're going to have to come to terms with it somehow."

"I know," Padmé replied, looking down at her hands folded in her lap. "I'm just....worried."

"I know you are," Dormé said, coming over and sitting beside her. "But you're doing this for him, you have to remember that, and somehow..."

“No, no it’s not that,” Padmé replied. She looked up at her friend. ‘I’m late, Dormé,’ she said quietly. “Several days late.”

Dormé frowned, not understanding for a moment, and then her eyes widened when she realized what Padmé was telling her. “You mean... you think you’re... that you might be...”

“I don’t know,” Padmé replied, looking down at her hands once more. “Perhaps it’s just all the stress... but I’m never late, Dormé. Never.”

“But... surely you’ve been taking precautions,” Dormé commented.

“Yes, I have,” Padmé replied. “I started going for shots before the wedding. So... it can’t be that, could it??”

Dormé didn’t know what to tell her; for she knew herself that no method of birth control, with the exception of abstinence, was completely fool proof. She slipped an arm around Padmé’s waist, doing her best to give her lady her support, hoping that Padmé’s fears were unfounded.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35

Lake Retreat — Naboo

Padmé had a great deal of difficulty falling asleep that night, for her mind was far too preoccupied with all the worries that she was burdened with. Even though she and Vader had been married only a short time, she had grown accustomed to having his large, warm body in her bed. She had not slept well since he had left for Geonosis, and knew that despite her love for the Lake Retreat, she would not sleep well this night either.

Finally, after a great deal of tossing and turning, Padmé managed to fall asleep, her arms wrapped around the extra pillow in the large bed. She was asleep when the door to her bedroom opened and a tall, silent figure entered the room. She didn't see him remove his boots and his clothing; she didn't see the smile on his face as he climbed into bed with her. However, when a large body pressed up behind hers, and a warm mouth found the side of her neck, she stirred her in her sleep. And when a pair of large hands slipped around her and gently caressed her body through the thin fabric of her nightgown, she began to respond to his touch.

Thinking that she was sleeping, Padmé smiled, enjoying the wonderful, sensual dream she was having. She smiled as she felt his hands pulling up the fabric of her nightgown along the sides of her body, deciding that this was one of the best dreams she'd ever had. Padmé moved onto her back as the hands grew more aggressive, moving up under the fabric of her nightgown. Her sleep state ended abruptly, however, when the hands ripped the fabric away from her body and a hot, avid mouth attached itself to her bare skin. Her eyes flew open at once as Vader continued to rip away her nightgown in his desperation to touch and taste her.

"Ani!" she gasped.

"Force I've missed you," he murmured.

Padmé was torn between her ardent need for him and her fear. She knew that if she allowed things to go much further there would be no stopping him.

"Anakin please stop," she said.

Vader looked up at her, certain that he had misunderstood. "Stop?" he asked. "Did you say stop??"

Padmé nodded. "Yes, please," she said, moving out from under him. She climbed off of the bed and turned on a light, pulling a blanket from the bed and wrapping it around herself.

Vader rolled onto his side and watched her, confusion clouding his already compromised thinking process. "What's going on?" he demanded. "I haven't seen you in a week! Why won't you let me make love to you?"

Padmé hated the hurt, angry tone in his voice, but stood her ground. “We need to talk,” she told him.

Vader frowned, her behavior starting to annoy him. “Talk?” he said. “Talking is about the last thing on my mind right now, Senator,” he told her, climbing off of the bed and walking towards her.

The sight of his magnificent, naked body was almost enough to undo Padmé, particularly when it was very obvious how much he wanted her. She moved away from him though, and ended up backing herself into a wall.

“We need to talk,” she said again as he continued to move closer.

“So go ahead,” he said, reaching her. “Talk,” he said, pinning her against the wall with his body.

Padmé closed her eyes as his mouth grazed over her neck. “Talk,” he said again, suckling her earlobe into his mouth.

“Ani, please stop,” she said softly.

He pulled back and looked at her, his hands positioned on either side of her braced against the wall.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, seeing the look of anguish in her eyes. “Why don’t you want this?”

“I do,” she replied at once. “It’s just that... we can’t.”

Vader frowned. “Why not?” he asked.

Padmé looked into his eyes, trying to summon the words that would destroy him. “Because,” she said quietly. “It’s over.”

Vader looked at her, searching her eyes, certain that she was joking. He didn’t like her joke, however, and frowned. “Don’t talk like that,” he said, taking her by the shoulders. “It’s not funny.”

“Anakin, I’m serious,” she insisted, trying to pull away from him. “Our marriage is over Anakin. That’s why I’ve come here. I left you. It’s over.”

Vader stared at her in disbelief. “You can’t be serious!” he declared.

“I am,” she insisted, pulling the blanket which had begun to slip down over her once again. “Completely serious.”

Vader looked at her, sensing that there was more to this than met the eye. And then he remembered what Jar Jar had told him, how Padmé had been upset and had left the office after Palpatine had been to see her.

“What’s really going on, Senator?” he demanded, releasing her finally. “Because I know something is.”

Padmé moved away, unable to meet his eyes any longer. “Anakin, please don’t ask me to explain,” she replied, her voice tremulous with emotion.

“You tell me our marriage is over and expect me to accept it without an explanation?” he said angrily. “I don’t think so! Tell me what the hell is going on, Padmé! Tell me now!”

Padmé turned away from him, unable to face him. “Palpatine told me the truth about the vote, Anakin,” she said, trying to make herself sound convincing. “He told me that it was your idea to keep me away from the capital so he could manipulate the Senate to vote in favor of the army. He told me that that was how you convinced him to allow you to marry me, that was the only reason he did.”

Vader was silent. “I told you that I knew nothing about his plans,” he replied, his voice edged with anger. “And you told me that you believed me. Are you telling me now that you believe Palpatine’s word over mine?”

Padmé didn’t reply, which only frustrated Vader more, and made him believe more than ever that there was more to this than he knew.

“Answer me, Senator,” he said his voice deadly calm.

Padmé turned to him. “What do you want me to say?” she asked quietly, her eyes filling with tears. “I’ve said everything I can say.”

Vader frowned and walked over to her. “Everything you *can* say?” he asked. “What does that mean?? Tell me what happened between you and Palpatine, Padmé. I know he said something to upset you, Jar Jar told me as much.”

“I told you what he said,” she replied.

“I know you don’t believe that,” he stated with certainty. “Tell me what really has you so upset. No, not just upset: terrified. What did he say to you?”

Padmé said nothing, her mind in turmoil.

Vader’s alarm grew as she maintained her silence. And then finally he spoke up again. “He threatened you, didn’t he?” he said quietly, but with unmistakable rage.

Padmé realized that it was pointless to try and deny it, for he seemed to be able to read her very thoughts. Tears rolled down her face as she finally nodded.

Vader’s rage was reaching its zenith. “What did he say to you?” he asked her again.

Padmé took an unsteady breath. “He... he told me that if I didn’t leave you he would kill everyone that I love, one by one,” she said. “And that he would make sure I was around to watch it happen.”

White rage exploded in Vader’s brain, and from the other side of the room a crystal vase burst into a thousand shards.

“He’ll do it, Ani,” she said, “don’t you see that?”

Vader shook his head. “No he won’t,” he promised her. “He won’t live long enough to, Padmé, I promise you!”

“But he has an army now, Anakin,” she reminded him. “He can do whatever he wants!”

Vader could see that she was on the verge of hysteria, and took her by the arms. "Listen to me," he said. "Do you think I'd let him do anything to hurt you? Don't you know how much you mean to me??"

Padmé nodded. "I know," she said quietly.

"Then have faith in my love," he told her, taking her face in his hands. "I won't let him hurt you or anyone you love," he promised her.

"Including you?" she asked.

"Including me," he assured her. 'Besides,' he added, gently wiping away the tears on her face, "I'd rather be dead than to live without you in my life."

"Ani!" she cried, and threw her arms around his neck. He held her close, feeling her body trembling in his embrace. She felt safe there for the first time in days, and simply gave way to the tears she'd held at bay for so long. "I missed you so much!" she cried.

Vader picked Padmé up in his arms and held her close, as his own emotions raged within him. He had never felt such a striking dichotomy of feelings at once; utter and ferocious hatred and deepest, most fervent love. "He won't win," he told her, his face pressed next to hers. "I promise you, Angel."

Padmé wasn't able to respond, for her tears were preventing it. Vader carried her over to the bed and gently lay her on it, and then lay beside her and pulled her close. For a few moments he simply held her, giving her comfort with his warm, reassuring presence.

Padmé got her crying under control after a few minutes and pulled away to look up at him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, holding her face in his hands.

"I think so," she replied. "I don't think I've ever been so frightened," she told him.

Vader nodded. "I know," he told her, caressing one cheek with a long finger. "But know that I will always protect you, Padmé. Always."

Padmé smiled. "I know you will," she replied. 'I love you so much,' she added. "How did I ever think I could do this?" she asked, stroking his face softly.

"I don't know," he replied with a smile. "Surely you knew I'd follow you to the ends of the galaxy."

"Would you?" she asked.

Vader nodded. "To the ends of the universe," he told her, moving closer and kissing her softly on the mouth.

Padmé ran her hands into his hair as she kissed him back, the desire he'd aroused in her earlier returning in full measure.

"I want you, Padmé," he whispered. "I need you," he murmured as his lips brushed over her neck.

Padmé closed her eyes, wondering distantly how she ever imagined that she could exist without him. "Yes, Ani," she sighed as his mouth traveled down the graceful column of her

throat. 'I need you too,' she told him. "So much!"

A week's separation had taken its toll on both of them, for the need they had for one another consumed them, pushing all thoughts of danger far from Padmé's mind. All she cared about was the incredible sensation of being joined with him this way, body, heart and soul. She felt certain that so long as they loved one another, Palpatine would never triumph. And what was more, Palpatine himself surely knew this. He knew that Vader was changing, that being in love was compromising the Darkness that had defined him for so long. Was it any wonder Palpatine was so hell bent on destroying their marriage?

A while later...

"By the Force you are incredible," he told her, still trying to catch his breath.

Padmé smiled, running a finger down one side of his face. "You must be exhausted," she said.

"Well you wore me out," he teased.

Padmé laughed. "I didn't mean that," she said. "I mean the mission."

"Ah that," he said with a yawn. "Well, it's over, that's the main thing."

She nodded. "I heard all about it on the news," she told him.

Vader yawned. "Good," he said. "Because I'm too tired to tell you about it right now," he said with a sleepy smile.

Padmé nodded and moved over to kiss him softly on the mouth. "We'll talk in the morning," she told him. "Sleep now."

Vader nodded sleepily and closed his eyes, falling asleep within a few moments. Padmé watched him, and then snuggled up to him and was soon asleep as well, feeling safe once more in the strong embrace of the man she loved.

Chapter 36

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Padmé ran down the village street, but it was as though her destination was always getting further away. In the distance she could see black smoke billowing into the sky. She knew that if she did not get there in time it would be too late to save them. Struggling against the exhaustion that filled her, against the pain in her lungs as they fought to get enough oxygen, she pushed onward, knowing that every second counted.

She had almost reached the street where the house was when before her a long line of white armored clone troopers appeared. They trained their weapons on her, forcing her to stop.

"I have to get to my parents!" she cried. "They're in trouble!"

"It's too late," one of the clones told her. "The fire has consumed the house. No one got out alive."

"NO!" Padmé screamed, trying to push her way through the wall of white armor. "I have to help them! I have to save them!"

A hand came down upon her shoulder and turned her around roughly, and she found herself staring into the yellow eyes of Palpatine. She tried to scream but no sound would come out of her mouth.

"I warned you, Senator," Palpatine hissed. "But you refused to listen. I told you what would happen, Amidala. I told you what price you would pay."

"No, please!" she implored. "Don't hurt anyone else, I'm begging you!"

But Palpatine only smiled, his eyes moving down her body to look at her midsection. "Oh I've only just started, Milady," he said, his repugnant smile growing. "I've only just started..."

"Padmé, wake up. Wake up!"

Padmé's eyes snapped open and darted around the room frantically. "Ani?" she asked the panic evident in her voice.

Vader reached over and activated the bedside lamp. "You were having a bad dream," he told her.

Padmé nodded, torn between tremendous relief that she'd only been dreaming and the terror that still ran through her veins from the nightmare. "My parents," she told him softly. "He had them killed!"

Vader frowned, and moved over to her again. "It was just a dream," he assured her, taking her by the shoulders. "Your parents are fine."

“How do you know?” she cried as panic took a hold of her. “He has spies everywhere! He had holos of us on our honeymoon, Anakin! He was watching us! How do we know he’s not watching us here? Right now??”

Vader had never seen his wife so rattled. She was on the verge of hysteria. “Padmé, listen to me,” he said, taking her face into his hands. “He’s not watching us, he doesn’t even know you’re here,” he assured her.

Padmé shook her head. “How do you know?” she asked, her eyes filling with tears.

Vader didn’t know what to tell her, for, in truth, he couldn’t be certain. The fact that Palpatine had holos of them on their honeymoon had both surprised and unnerved him. “Trust me, okay?” he said at last. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you, I’m not going to let anyone hurt your family. Palpatine will be dead before he can put any nefarious plans he has into play, I promise you. The Jedi know all about him now, Padmé, and they are watching him very closely.”

Padmé took hope from his words. “You... you told them?” she asked. “You told the Jedi about Palpatine?”

Vader nodded. “I told them everything,” he replied. “They sent representatives to Tatooine to verify my story,” he added. “I suppose they are having a hard time trusting me since I told them that I’ve been Palpatine’s apprentice.”

“I suppose so,” she agreed. Knowing that the Jedi were aware of Palpatine’s true identity made her feel better and she finally began to relax. “Will they arrest him then?” she asked.

Vader nodded, running a hand through her tousled hair. “They are watching him very closely,” he assured her. “He won’t be able to break wind without them knowing about it,” he added with a smile.

Padmé smiled, loving him for trying to make her feel better. “Good,” she said. She sighed. “That was a terrible dream, Ani,” she told him, a frown creasing her brow.

“I could tell,” he said. “Nightmares are terrible things; I’ve had a few in my life as well.”

“I know you have,” she replied, reaching out and stroking his face softly. “You’ve lived under this monster’s thumb for so long it’s a wonder you’ve kept your sanity all this time.”

Vader shrugged. “I’ve developed a pretty thick hide,” he told her. “I’ve had too.”

“Yes, I noticed that about you,” she replied.

Vader lifted an eyebrow. “You did?” he said.

Padmé nodded. “I have a pretty good understanding of human psychology,” she told him. “I had you pegged after about three days.”

Vader laughed. “I’m that easy to figure out, am I?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” she replied. “In fact, it’s quite the opposite. But I had a vested interest in gaining an understanding in the way your mind works.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that,” he replied. “When you agreed to marry me I expected that you’d hate me forever. You told me as much.”

Padmé shrugged. “Well, I did plan to,” she admitted. “But that was before I realized there was more to you than met the eye.”

“I see,” Vader replied, playing with her hair. “Well, I’m very glad that you were able to see past my crusty exterior,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé laughed. “It wasn’t easy,” she admitted. “You were very difficult to like in the beginning.”

“I know,” he replied with a smile. “I’m a real bastard when I want to be,” he added.

She shook her head. “And mighty proud of that too,” she said.

“Well, it comes in handy sometimes,” he said, wrapping his arms around her with a yawn. ‘I think we need to sleep some more,’ he told her. “Otherwise I won’t be able to wake you up in my favorite manner.”

“We can’t have that,” she said, nestling back into his arms.

“Absolutely not,” he agreed with a yawn, kissing her bare shoulder.

The next morning

“Milady, I’ve brought you some tea,” Dormé said as she stood outside Padmé’s bedroom door. She received no answer, and so she lightly knocked on the door. “Milady?” she asked, opening the door tentatively. She walked in carrying a cup of tea for Padmé. It was quiet in the bedroom, and she figured Padmé must still be sleeping. Deciding to leave it for her, Dormé walked into the room and stopped when she saw Padmé’s ripped nightgown on the floor. Her eyes moved over the floor and soon spied a pair of large black boots, and then a pile of clothing that was definitely not Padmé’s. Looking up at the bed she smiled as she saw Vader sleeping in the bed, one large arm draped possessively over his wife. Padmé was also asleep, with Vader spooned up behind her. Dormé turned and left them to sleep, taking the cup of tea with her.

It was quite late the next morning when Padmé and Vader finally emerged from their bedroom. Dormé simply smiled when they walked into the dining room hand in hand, not at all surprised by their late start to the day.

“Good morning,” Dormé greeted them with a smile. “Can I get you some breakfast?”

“That would be wonderful, thank you Dormé,” Padmé replied as Vader pulled out a chair for her.

“She didn’t seem terribly surprised to see me,” Vader commented once Dormé had left the room.

“No she didn’t,” Padmé agreed. She smiled as she remembered something. “You know, she predicted weeks ago that I would end up falling in love with you,” she told him.

“Really?” he asked. “That’s amazing considering the rocky start we had.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes it is,” she replied. ‘I just laughed at her when she said that,’ she added. “I guess I’ll have to eat my words now.”

Vader picked up her hand and kissed it. “Yes, I’m afraid so,” he teased. “Not something you’re accustomed to, I’m sure.”

Padmé laughed again. “And what does that mean exactly?” she asked.

“You’re a politician,” he replied with a smile. “Having to admit you’re wrong is against your religion.”

Padmé’s eyes widened in surprise, which only increased Vader’s amusement.

“You just love to tease me, don’t you?” she asked.

Vader nodded. “Absolutely,” he agreed with a grin as Dormé entered the room with breakfast for both of them.

“It’s good to see you, Lord Vader,” Dormé said as she set a plate down before each of them. “I can’t say that I’m surprised to see you though,” she couldn’t resist adding, looking at Padmé with a smile.

Vader laughed. “I understand my wife has something besides her breakfast to eat where you’re concerned,” he commented, looking at Padmé.

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Dormé replied, looking at Padmé pointedly.

Padmé laughed. “All right, all right!” she exclaimed. “I was wrong, you were right. Happy now?” she asked with a smile.

Dormé nodded. “Yes, now was that so hard?” she asked.

“Join us, Dormé,” Vader said, surprising her with his invitation. “I want to talk to you both about my plans.”

Dormé looked at Padmé, and then took a seat across from them. “Plans?” she asked. “What plans do you mean?”

“I’m sure Padmé has told you about the situation,” he began. “About Palpatine’s threats.”

Dormé nodded. “Yes she has,” she replied, looking at Padmé. “However it seems her plans have gone awry,” she pointed out.

“Her plan was unacceptable,” Vader said simply. “I won’t allow him to split us up,” he added, looking at Padmé.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Dormé said.

“But since we are together, that creates a dangerous situation,” Vader continued. ‘One that must be handled very carefully. I want you to stay here, Padmé,’ he told her. “And I think perhaps your family ought to come here as well,” he added. “I will ask the Jedi Council to send someone here to protect you against the off chance that Palpatine learns of your whereabouts.”

Padmé frowned. “What about you?” she asked. “Where are you going?”

“I think you know where I need to go,” Vader replied.

Padmé exchanged a look with Dormé, and then looked back at Vader. “Please tell me you’re not going to confront Palpatine,” she said.

“Of course,” he replied. “I told you that I was going to deal with him.”

“Let the Jedi deal with him,” she returned. “Once they’ve verified your story they will arrest him and he will be out of our lives forever!”

“The Jedi can’t handle him, Padmé,” he countered. “They have no idea who they’re up against! He’s fooled them all for years; do you really think they have a clue what he’s capable of?”

Dormé was beginning to feel uneasy sitting here listening to their discussion. She wondered if Padmé had told her husband of her suspicions. Surely if he knew that there was possibly a child in the equation he would not be so reckless. Or would he?

Padmé remained silent, knowing how strongly her husband felt about getting his revenge against Palpatine. And yet, the thought of him taking him on alone, unsanctioned, terrified her. Until the Jedi believed Vader and saw Palpatine as the threat he claimed the chancellor was, any action taken against Palpatine would be deemed as a criminal act.

“Anakin, please wait for the Jedi,” she pleaded. “Please don’t do anything that could land you in prison. Or worse.”

Vader sighed, not wanting to upset his wife, but not willing to let go of his revenge either. “Padmé, don’t ask me this,” he said with a frown. “I’ve waited a long time for my revenge.”

“But you have more to consider now than just you own welfare,” Dormé spoke up quite unexpectedly. “You have your wife’s, and quite possibly...”

“Dormé!” Padmé interjected before she could say any more.

Vader looked at his wife. “What was she about to say, Padmé?” he asked. When she said nothing he looked back at Dormé. “Finish your sentence,” he told her.

Dormé looked at him, and then at Padmé, who was giving her a stern look. “I... I think perhaps I’ve said too much,” she stammered, and stood up. “This is a conversation that ought to be between a husband and wife,” she added, and then ran from the room.

Vader was growing exasperated and looked back at his wife. “What the hell is going on?” he demanded. “What is she on about?”

Padmé sighed, realizing that there would be no getting out of telling him her suspicions now. “I’m late, Anakin,” she told him, looking down at her half eaten breakfast. “Almost a week.”

Vader frowned, not experienced enough to get the subtlety of what she was telling him. “Late??” he asked. “What do you mean late?”

Padmé squirmed in her seat, realizing that she’d have to put it into clear, unmistakable language. “I think I’m pregnant, Anakin,” she told him finally.

When Vader did not say anything in response, Padmé looked up at him. “Please say something,” she said quietly.

Vader was too shocked to say anything for a moment, the thought of a baby so far from his mind that he was unprepared with a response. “Pregnant?” he said at last. “You’re pregnant??”

“I don’t know for sure,” she said, “but...”

He pushed his chair out and stood up suddenly, and then turned her chair so that she was facing him. Kneeling down on the floor before her, he brought a large hand to her abdomen, his face a picture of concentration.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Seeing if you’re pregnant,” he told her.

“How can you tell?” she asked.

But Vader didn’t reply, for his mind was too focused on searching out the depths of her womb for any sign of life. He knew instinctively that he would recognize it, that his child would have a Force presence even at this early stage.

Padmé watched him, fascinated. She wasn’t sure what to expect; would he be happy if she was pregnant? Or would it only complicate things?

And then he smiled. “Guess what?” he said as he looked up at her.

“What?” she asked.

“There are two of them,” he told her as his smile grew. “You’re carrying twins, Senator.”

Chapter 37

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Padmé stared at her husband, his pronouncement rendering her momentarily speechless. “Twins?” she said at last. “I’m carrying twins??”

Vader nodded.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Vader nodded again, his eyes returning to her midriff. “Yes,” he assured her. ‘Absolutely sure.’ He smiled again. “I can’t believe we’re going to be parents,” he said.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “I was taking precautions... how could this have happened?” she asked.

“Ask my mother that question some time,” he replied.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I’d forgotten about that,” she said. “Are you... okay with this, then?” she asked.

Vader looked back up at her. “Okay? I’m ecstatic!” he told her, pulling her into his embrace. “This is the happiest moment of my life,” he added.

Padmé closed her eyes, relieved and elated at once. And yet, ever present at the back of her mind was the fear that had been there since her encounter with Palpatine. “Ani, what if Palpatine finds out about them?” she asked. “In my nightmare he knew.”

Vader pulled back and looked at her. “I can hide them, Padmé,” he assured her. “He won’t learn of their existence, I swear it.”

Padmé nodded, believing that he would do everything he could to protect their children. “Now will you reconsider your course of action?” she asked, taking his face in her hands. “Now that we have twins on the way?”

Vader looked down for a moment, torn between what he wanted to do and what he needed to do. Clearly his family had to come first. It would be unthinkable to leave Padmé alone to raise two children, especially since the Jedi would no doubt be very interested in the twins.

“I won’t promise anything,” he told her, standing up once more, “except to promise to do my best to keep my anger under control. That’s the best I can do.”

Padmé looked up at him and took his hand. “I know how difficult this is for you,” she said. “But please, for the sake of these tiny little ones, please don’t do anything rash.”

Vader nodded. “I will try,” he told her. “Perhaps you ought to make contact with your parents and tell them my idea. If I don’t want to arouse Palpatine’s suspicions I need to get back to the capital right away.”

“I know,” she said, standing up with him. “I’ll contact them right away.”

“And I’ll contact the Jedi,” he told her. “I won’t leave until someone is here to protect you.”

“Good,” she said. “That makes me feel better.”

Vader took his wife by the shoulders. “This will all be over soon, Senator,” he told her. “And then we can start our life without worrying about him interfering any more.”

“I can’t wait for that day,” she told him. “Especially now,” she added with a smile, rubbing over her flat abdomen.

Vader nodded. “Yes, especially now,” he agreed. “Come on, let’s go contact your family.”

Jedi Temple — Coruscant

Obi-Wan Kenobi was just getting ready to start his day when his personal comm sounded. He sat down at the computer in his small quarters and activated it, surprised to see Vader’s face appear.

“Good morning Obi-Wan,” Vader said. “I hope I didn’t wake you up,” he added.

“Not at all,” he replied. “What can I do for you?”

“I need your help, Obi-Wan,” Vader responded. “I need you to come here, to Naboo.”

Obi-Wan was surprised by this and listened as Vader related the situation to him. He listened in silence, his own distrust of Palpatine increasing as he heard of the cold-bloodedness with which he threatened Padmé.

“I need you to protect Padmé,” Vader concluded. “If we are to keep Palpatine from suspecting the truth, I must get back to the capital as soon as possible.”

Obi-Wan nodded, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “You realize of course I will have to clear this with the Council,” he said. “But since half of them aren’t here, it shouldn’t be too difficult to get their approval,” he added wryly.

Vader smiled, remembering once more why he liked Kenobi so much. “So you’ll come?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Expect me within twenty-four hours,” he said. “Is that soon enough?”

“Yes,” Vader replied. “Absolutely. Thank you, Obi-Wan.”

“Well, I do owe you,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

“Twice by my reckoning,” Vader replied with a smile.

“Ah yes, of course,” Obi-Wan replied. “So you can definitely count on me being there.”

Vader nodded. “Good,” he replied. “I’ll be expecting you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there,” he said.

Naboo

Padmé’s family, including Sola and her family, arrived at the Lake Retreat before evening. Vader watched her interact with her family, the closeness between them clear to see. He wondered if she would share her news with them now that he had confirmed her suspicions

about being pregnant. Vader thought of his own mother, and how excited she would be to become a grandmother. He wished there was some way he could convince Shmi to come to stay with he and Padmé; but she was devoted to her husband and it wasn't likely that he wanted to leave Tatooine and his farm there.

Dinner was a loud and enjoyable occasion, the small nieces of Padmé taking center stage. They were far too young to be told about the danger that their family was in, and merely thought that they were having a special holiday at the lake with their dear aunt and her new husband, Uncle Ani. Vader was enchanted by the young girls, and it made the prospect of becoming a father himself even more exciting to him. He and Padmé had decided not to tell her family about the pregnancy since it was still so early; but Vader had to wonder if she would be able to keep it a secret from her mother who seemed to know her so very well. *She's going to be a wonderful mother*, he reflected as he watched Padmé interact with her nieces. *She's had a great role model*. Vader frowned as he realized that he hadn't been so fortunate. He'd never had a father, and was raised from a young age by a malicious monster. *What kind of a father will I be?*

"When do you expect the Jedi to arrive?"

Vader had to focus on the conversation that was going on around him and looked at his brother-in-law who had asked the question. "Obi-Wan told me he'd be here within twenty-four hours," he replied. "So I expect he'll be here by morning."

"Is the situation really so serious that we need the protection of the Jedi?" Sola asked quietly, keeping an eye on her daughters.

"I'm afraid so," Vader replied. 'The chancellor is a ruthless, maniacal monster,' he told them. "He's capable of anything. Believe me, I know."

"So you're going to make him believe that you and Padmé are separated?" Jobal asked.

"Yes, it's imperative that he believes that," Vader told her. "It may not fool him for long, but I don't expect him to be around for much longer. Either the Jedi or I will deal with him before long, and then we can all breathe a lot easier."

Ruwee nodded. "And what are your plans, then?" he asked Vader. "Do you plan to join the Jedi?"

Vader looked at his wife, who was listening intently for his response. "I don't know what the future holds," he admitted. "I don't know if the Jedi would even consider taking me as one of their own after I've spent the past fifteen years in apprenticeship to a Sith Lord."

"But after what you've done, after the way you've lead them to the Sith Lord they've been looking for, surely they would," Padmé spoke up.

Vader shrugged. "Maybe," he replied. "I'm not so sure, Angel. Maybe I'll take up farming on Tatooine," he added with a smile.

Padmé shook her head. "You'd make a terrible farmer," she told him with a smile. "You even said so yourself, remember?"

"I remember," Vader replied, recalling very vividly their first night as lovers at the Lars homestead.

“Well whatever you decide, you know you’ll have your family’s support,” Jobal said at this point. “I hope you realize that we’re your family now, Vader.”

Vader looked at his mother-in-law. “I’m honored that you consider me part of your family,” he told her. “But there’s just one thing I’d like to ask of you,” he added.

Jobal’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “Oh? What is that?”

“Please don’t call me by that name any more,” Vader said. “I’ve decided to abandon my Sith name from now on. Please call me by my real name, Anakin Skywalker.”

Jobal smiled, and looked at her daughter whose face bore the happiness she felt at hearing this. “I think we can all manage to remember that,” she told her son-in-law.

Later that night...

Anakin watched from bed as Padmé sat brushing out her long hair. He had come to realize that this was a ritual with her, as much a part of her bed time routine as brushing her teeth and washing her face. He found it soothing to watch her, loving the way her brown curls fell over her shoulders. He had woken up more than once surrounded by the glorious mane of tresses, their scent intoxicating him. *Everything about her intoxicates me*, he thought with a smile as she set the brush down at last.

“I was surprised to hear you ask my mother to call you Anakin,” she told him as she walked over to the bed. “Pleasantly surprised, but surprised nonetheless.”

“I got thinking about the twins,” he told her as she climbed into the bed beside him. “I don’t want them carrying the name that Palpatine gave me. I want them to have my real name, the name my mother gave me.”

Padmé nodded. “I couldn’t agree more,” she told him, leaning over and kissing his cheek.

Anakin smiled. “You have a great family,” he remarked.

Padmé smiled. “I think so too,” she replied. “I can only imagine how excited my mother will be when I tell her about the twins,” she added.

“No doubt,” he agreed. ‘Mine will be too,’ he added. “Her first grandchildren.”

“Yes, she’ll be thrilled,” Padmé replied. ‘I wish we could convince her to move to Coruscant somehow,’ she added. “Tatooine is so very far.”

“I know,” Anakin replied. ‘I’ve been thinking the same thing.’ He stretched his arms over his head with a yawn. “You’re going to be a wonderful mother, Padmé,” he told her, as she snuggled into his arms. “I was watching you with your sister’s kids. You’re a natural.”

Padmé smiled. “I’ve always loved children,” she told him. “But being a parent is a lot different than being an aunt,” she pointed out.

“True,” he replied. “Still, you’ve had experience with kids. I’ve had none. And as far as role models go...” he stopped as his insecurities got the better of him. “I hope I can be a good father,” he told her.

Padmé could see how anxious he was. “You will be,” she told him, reaching up to stroke his face softly. “I have every faith in you.”

Anakin captured her hand and kissed it. “Thanks,” he said. “That means a lot to me, Angel.”

Padmé simply relaxed in his arms for a moment. “I hope the Jedi have finished with their investigation by now,” she said.

“Obi-Wan didn’t mention anything, so I’m assuming they haven’t,” Anakin replied.

“I’m so glad you and he have become friends,” she told him.

“He’s a good man,” Anakin agreed. ‘I can see why you placed your trust in him.’ He paused for a moment before continuing. “You know, he’s really the first friend I’ve ever had,” he told her, “unless you count the boys I ran with when I was a child.”

Padmé smiled. “Well I hope you consider me your friend,” she replied.

Anakin looked down at her. “Well, I suppose,” he replied. “Though the feelings I have for you aren’t exactly... platonic,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé laughed. “No, I noticed that,” she replied as he began to nuzzle her neck. “Ani, you do remember that my parents are in the room across the hall,” she told him.

“So?”

“So we can’t...” she stopped as his hands moved down to her nightie. “We can’t do this,” she said, not sounding terribly convincing.

“Why not?” he asked. “We did it in my mother’s house,” he reminded her.

“Yes, but she wasn’t asleep in the room across the hall,” she countered.

Anakin looked at her with a smile. “You’re afraid you won’t be able to be quiet, is that it?” he teased.

“I can so be quiet,” she countered.

“Then what’s the problem?” he asked, moving to nuzzle her neck again.

Padmé laughed, realizing that it was pointless to try and reason with him when he was in this frame of mind.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38

Anakin looked down at the tiny infant in his arms, who was sleeping peacefully. A tiny fist encircled one of Anakin's fingers, as father and son simply basked in one another's presence. He could feel the baby's Force signature reaching out to his own, already strong, already with its own identity. The Light that filled the small boy poured into Anakin's soul, pushing aside the Darkness that still lingered there. He had never felt so connected with another person, so complete as he did basking in the purity of his infant son.

The door to the nursery opened and Padmé walked in, a baby in her arms as well.

"Bring her here, Padmé," Anakin told his wife. She walked over and set the tiny girl into the crook of his other arm.

Anakin looked down at his daughter with a smile. She looked nothing like her twin brother, and yet her Force signature was very similar to his.

"They're so beautiful," Anakin told his wife. He looked up at Padmé. "Just like their mother."

Padmé smiled. "Leia may look like me, but Luke is all you," she told him.

Anakin nodded. Even he had to admit that their son bore a striking resemblance to him. He bent and planted a kiss on each of the foreheads of the twins, savoring the sweet smell of their skin. "Did you know that it's your birthday?" he told them softly. "That you're a month old today?"

The twins stirred, and their eyes began to flutter.

"Uh oh," Anakin said, looking up at his wife. "Looks like I woke them up."

"Looks that way," she agreed. "That wasn't on purpose now, was it?" she asked with a smile.

"Of course not," he replied, turning to look back at the twins. "Why would I do such a..." he stopped as he saw the twins' eyes looking up at him. They were yellow...

Anakin awoke with a gasp, sitting bold upright in bed. He was bathed in sweat, his heart hammering in his chest. No, no that won't happen! He told himself, running his shaking hands through his sweat soaked hair. They will be pure, and good and full of light! They won't be like me... they won't be like me!!

"Ani? You okay?"

Anakin turned to his sleepy wife and nodded. "Just... need a drink of water," he told her. "Go back to sleep."

Padmé was only too happy to comply, for it was still very early, and rolled over and resumed her slumber. Anakin waited until she was asleep again and then got up. After putting

on his sleep pants, he left their bedroom silently and headed outside to the large terrace to watch the sun rise.

Anakin's hands were still trembling as he rested his forearms on the railing, his eyes fixed on the scene of tranquility below. He dared't tell Padmé about his nightmare; how would she react to such a dreadful specter?

"Good morning."

Anakin was startled by the voice and turned to see Obi-Wan Kenobi walking towards him. The Jedi could see at once that something was troubling the young man.

"Good morning, Obi-Wan," Anakin replied. "I'm glad you're here."

Obi-Wan nodded, watching him closely. "You seem very upset," he commented. "What's wrong?"

Anakin looked back out at the lake below. "Just a bad dream," he replied, trying to sound casual.

Obi-Wan, however, wasn't easily convinced. "What about?" he asked.

Anakin did not reply, not knowing what he could say that wouldn't give away he and Padmé's precious secret. "It's personal," he said at last.

"I see," Obi-Wan replied, feeling certain that the dream had something to do with Palpatine.

"Let's go inside," Anakin said at last. "You must be hungry after the long trip."

Obi-Wan followed his host inside, trying to get a sense of what was going through his mind. But Anakin was very good at shielding his thoughts, and his mind was shut tight, impervious to any admittance. His abilities once again amazed Obi-Wan, who was by now quite convinced that Anakin Skywalker was indeed the Chosen One of Jedi lore.

"Good morning Dormé," Anakin said as he and Obi-Wan entered the dining room. "Could we get some breakfast?"

"Of course," Dormé said. She looked at Obi-Wan with a smile. "It's good to see you again, Master Kenobi," she said.

"And you as well, Miss Dormé," Obi-Wan replied with a bow.

Anakin waited for her to leave the room before he spoke up. "What was that about?" he asked.

Obi-Wan frowned as he sat down. "What?" he said. "I was merely being polite."

"Polite my foot," Anakin replied as he took a seat. "You like her," he stated. "Don't you?"

"Really Anakin," Obi-Wan sniffed. "You must learn some manners. Besides, Jedi do not *like* anyone. Well, not in the manner that you mean."

Anakin nodded. "Whatever you say, Master Kenobi," he replied. "So has the Council come to their senses yet?"

"If you mean have they arrested the Chancellor yet, the answer is no, I'm afraid," Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin frowned. "What is taking them so long?" he asked hotly. "Don't they get it? Once the clone army has finished its task, he will issue the order to destroy the Jedi! Isn't that reason enough to arrest him?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "If you're asking me, yes," he replied. "The chancellor has done more than enough to merit being arrested, particularly now that he has issued this threat against Padmé and her family. By the way, did you think to take the holo surveillance footage of that afternoon from her office?"

"I haven't been back to the capital since I found out," Anakin replied.

Obi-Wan frowned. "You must do so as soon as possible," he replied. "We will need every shred of evidence if we are to convict this man. He owns the courts; he is too powerful to leave anything to chance."

Anakin nodded his own ideas on the subject much more direct. "He needs to die," he said simply. "Spare the taxpayers the cost of a trial that would inevitably turn into a media circus. You know that as well as I do, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan said nothing for a moment, his own thoughts on the subject conflicting with the Jedi beliefs he was trained to uphold. Anakin could sense his conflict, and pressed on.

"Off the record, Obi-Wan," he said. "Tell me what you really think."

Obi-Wan looked up at him, knowing instinctively that he could trust Anakin. "Off the record, I think you need to do what you must," he said simply.

His words surprised Anakin. "And if I do? Will the Jedi support me?"

"I cannot answer that," he replied. "But I can tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"I'll support you," Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin was prevented from replying by the entry of Dormé into the room.

"Good morning," Padmé said as she entered the room shortly afterwards.

The two men stood up to greet her, her husband pulling out a chair for her as was his custom.

"Good morning," he said, kissing her on the cheek as she took her seat.

"It's good to see you again, Obi-Wan," she said, smiling at the Jedi. "Thank you for coming here so quickly."

"It is my honor to serve you once again, Milady," he replied.

"How are things on the capital?" she asked.

"Rather quiet at the moment," Obi-Wan told her.

"The calm before the storm," Anakin commented.

Padmé looked at him. “Let’s hope that storm never comes,” she said.

“That is all our hope,” Obi-Wan added.

Later that morning

Padmé sat on the end of the bed watching as Anakin finished getting dressed. She hadn’t said anything for quite a while now, but she didn’t need to. Anakin knew exactly what was on her mind.

“I’m going to stay on the capital to help the Jedi apprehend Palpatine,” he told her as he pulled on his boots. “They won’t be able to take him without a fight, I’m sure.”

Padmé nodded. “Does Obi-Wan have any idea when that will happen?”

“No,” Anakin replied. “They haven’t concluded their investigation.”

Padmé frowned. “What are they waiting for?” she asked in exasperation. “For Palpatine to do something truly reprehensible? For him to kill someone?”

Anakin sat down on the bed beside her. “I promise you that won’t happen,” he told her, putting an arm around her shoulders. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Padmé nodded. “I know,” she said. “I just wish this was over. I hate this, Ani.”

Anakin kissed the top of her head. “I know you do,” he replied. “So do I. But in a few days it will all be over, I promise you.”

Padmé closed her eyes, trying her best not to let her worry overwhelm her. “Will you be able to contact me while you’re away?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “I will. I’ll keep you and Obi-Wan posted on what is going on everyday.”

“Good,” she replied.

Anakin hugged her close for a moment. “I have to go,” he told her.

“I know,” she replied, hugging him back. “I’ll walk you to the pier.”

The trip to Coruscant afforded Anakin a long time to think. And the more he thought, the more he realized that, despite his desire for revenge, waiting for the Jedi would be the best course of action.

The nightmare he’d had about the twins had shown him in no uncertain terms the deep seated fear that he had about his own shortcomings; he knew that to give in to the lust for revenge that he felt would mire him more deeply into the darkness that he was trying so desperately to escape. If he were to ever rise above it, he must learn patience, and he must learn to master his anger. Not an easy thing considering he’d spent the past fifteen years using his anger as a means of power. But now, for the sake of his family, he must do just that. Not just for their sake, but for his own.

Anakin knew that he and he alone was the master of his destiny. He could not rely on any one else, not even his wife, to save him. Redemption, if he were to realize it, must come from

within, and from his own sense of purpose, and from his own sense of what was right and what was wrong.

The first step he had already taken when he'd shown mercy to Dooku. Granted, he'd ended up killing him in the end, but that was only to save the life of a friend. Showing mercy was not the way of the Sith; and it was the first step in what Anakin knew would be a long and arduous journey.

The second step had been to abandon his Sith name. Reclaiming his birth name had distanced him even more from the Sith, and had given him back the identity he was born with, shedding the one created for him by his master. Darth Vader must die if Anakin were ever to know redemption; abandoning that name was the first step towards doing that.

But the most difficult step was what lie ahead. Confronting Palpatine without giving in to the hatred he felt towards him would be the ultimate test. What if he failed? What if the darkness was still too strong in him? The Jedi may never accept or help him if that was the case. And what of his wife? And their twins? These questions tore at Anakin's mind as he raced through hyperspace on his way to meet his destiny.

Chapter 39

Chapter 39

Coruscant

Anakin was tired, but knew that he couldn't put off the meeting with Palpatine any further. In order to ensure his wife's safety, he had to make sure that Palpatine believed that he and Padmé were separated. He need not hide the fact that he'd been to Naboo; no doubt Palpatine had expected him to go after her. He only hoped that the Jedi would not delay much longer in their deliberations.

Before heading up to the chancellor's office, Anakin stopped at the floor where his wife's office was. He was relieved to see that Jar Jar was not at his desk, for he was in no mood to deal with the exuberant creature.

Walking into Padmé's office, he looked up at the security camera and deactivated it with a movement of his hand. He then set about retrieving the footage of the fateful meeting between Padmé and the chancellor. Once he'd found it, he sat down at the computer to watch it.

The anger that he'd felt from the moment that Padmé had told him the truth was augmented a thousand fold as he watched the scene unfold before him.

"You think that he loves you, don't you? The man isn't capable of it, Senator; he may use your body for his own physical gratification, but love? Please... I want you to leave Vader. No, I insist that you do. This marriage has served its purpose, and now it's time for it to end... If you refuse, I will see to it that you live to see every member of your family eradicated... You know better than that. And if you doubt my resolve, simply ask your beloved husband about the imprudence of crossing me..."

Hatred surged through Anakin, raw, potent hatred that filled his entire being. The fear that he saw in his wife's eyes as she sat listing to the evil spewing forth from Palpatine only added to his anger. He stopped the holo and removed the disc, storing it safely in his pocket. Then he stood up, darkness bristling through him. He left the office and headed to the lift.

Jedi Temple

Mace Windu had just arrived back on the planet from his trip to Tatooine and headed directly to see Master Yoda to report on his findings there.

Yoda looked up from his mediation as Windu entered the room. "Welcome back, Master Windu," he said. "What news have you from Tatooine?"

Windu sat down cross-legged on one of the large round seats in the room. "Everything Vader, or should I say Skywalker, told us was verified by his mother," he reported. "The kidnapping, Dooku's involvement, everything."

Yoda nodded. "And the boy's mother?" he asked. "Did she confirm the circumstances of Anakin's birth?"

"She said that there had been no father when she became pregnant," Windu reported. "And I sensed no deceit within her. She was a remarkable woman, Yoda; humble, kind hearted and yet possessing a great wisdom."

Yoda considered this for a moment. "Think you that Skywalker is the Chosen One?" he asked. "Now that you have met the mother?"

Windu didn't reply at once. "It's possible," he said finally. "His count would certainly indicate that he is an extraordinary being."

"I agree," Yoda replied. 'But now to the question of the chancellor,' he continued. "Is he the Sith Lord we have been looking for as Skywalker claims?"

"I don't think there's any question that he is," Windu replied. "I have to admit that I never trusted Vader, but when he killed Dooku to save Obi-Wan's life... I couldn't ignore that. Skywalker is telling the truth. And if he believes Palpatine is dangerous, then we have to take him at his word."

"Trusted he is by Master Kenobi," Yoda pointed out. "He does not give his trust lightly."

"Yes, I know that," Windu replied.

Yoda nodded. "Arrest him we must," he stated. "Too dangerous it is to leave him unchecked," he added.

"Agreed," Windu said. "No Sith Lord will ever take control of the Republic, not while I'm alive to prevent it."

Office of the Chancellor

Palpatine looked up from his computer screen when he heard the door to his office slide open. He smiled when he saw his apprentice enter the room. "Lord Vader," he said. "I was wondering when you'd come to see me."

"I've been away from the capital," Anakin told him, fighting hard to keep his mental shields in place.

Palpatine feigned surprised. "Oh?" he asked. "And why is that?"

"My wife," Anakin replied. "I followed her in order to confront her."

"Confront her??" Palpatine asked in surprise. "Why ever would you do that?"

"She has ended our marriage," Anakin replied, allowing a brief flash of anger.

"Oh my," Palpatine replied with mock sympathy. "I'm so sorry to hear it. And just when the two of you were getting so...close, too."

"Close?" Anakin asked.

"Don't patronize me, Vader," Palpatine snapped, his façade of benevolence falling to the way side. "I know you and she have been sexually involved for quite some time now. You

deliberately disobeyed me, Vader. You just couldn't keep control of your carnal urges, could you?"

"I love Senator Amidala," he declared. "Something you'd know nothing about."

"Love?" Palpatine laughed. 'Since when does a Sith know anything about love? And make no mistake, Vader,' he warned. "You *are* a Sith. Don't think that because you've given in to the pleasure of the flesh that makes you anything less than one."

Anakin could feel his entire body tensing up as he fought against the rage that was mounting rapidly within him. Palpatine sensed it, and it pleased him.

"And yet," he continued, 'perhaps it's a good thing. Perhaps impregnating the senator would be a good plan,' he added. "The fruits of such a union would be most useful," he concluded with an evil smile.

"You will not take my children from me!" Anakin roared, too incensed to realize what he was saying.

Palpatine narrowed his eyes, pleased that Anakin had fallen into the trap. "Such insolence," he snapped. "You seem to forget whom you are talking to, Lord Vader!" he said, lifting his hands to send a bolt of Sith lightning across the room. To his utter shock, however, Anakin held out his hands and deflected the energy, sending it to the ceiling where it crackled harmlessly.

"I won't take your abuse any longer, Sidious," Anakin said, walking towards the desk, sending a potent energy blast at the stunned old man.

Palpatine was too shocked to react in time, and the blast sent him flying back against the chair. He winced in pain, seeing first hand just how powerful his apprentice had truly become.

"Traitor!" he hissed once the lighting had subsided. "This is the thanks I get for making you what you are? You betray me because of that whore??"

Anakin's eyes flashed yellow and red as he sent another bolt, more powerful than the last at his former master. "She has saved me from the hell you put me in Sidious," he said, still advancing. "It is because of her that I am finally able to see you for what you truly are. A monster," he concluded, punctuating his statement with another blast.

Palpatine managed to deflect this one, having produced his lightsaber from underneath his cloak. "And what do you think you are?" he taunted. "You think you are any better than me? You are exactly like me, Vader!"

Anakin used the Force to bring his own lightsaber to his hand and with a quick leap over the desk he held his blade to that of his master. "I am nothing like you," he said in a voice full of enmity.

Palpatine tried to push the blade away, but the lightning had weakened him. Besides that, Anakin was stronger than him, much stronger than even Palpatine had realized. And for the first time in his life, the old man grew fearful.

"You can't kill me, Vader," he said, backing away. "You think the Jedi would take you in? You think they'd accept you? They're using you, aren't they? They're using you right now to kill me!"

Anakin advanced upon the old man, shaking his head. “They don’t know I’m here,” he assured him. ‘I am master of my own destiny now, Sidious,’ he told him. “For the first time in my life, I am free,” he said, and then lunged forward. Palpatine tried to deflect Anakin’s blade, but the young man was simply too quick and too strong. Anakin pushed forward, knowing that he was using the Dark Side, but not caring at this point. All he wanted was revenge, all he wanted was for this thing before him to suffer, and to pay for all the suffering he’d caused. With a cunning move Anakin disarmed the old man, who fell to his knees in exhaustion.

“How does it feel, my master?” Anakin taunted as he tightened his fist, making Palpatine’s hands fly to his throat as he gasped for air. ‘You’ve taught well,’ he added. “Maybe too well.”

Palpatine managed to raise one hand and Force push weakly at his foe. He wasn’t able to move Anakin, but he did manage to release his grip on him.

“You’ll never defeat me, Vader,” Palpatine rasped. “Even if you kill me, you will always be a Sith! And through you I will live forever, just as I will live through your progeny!”

“Enough of your lies!” he roared. ‘Go now to the hell you came from,’ Anakin said, holding his blade to the old man’s throat. “And go knowing that your kind dies with you,” he added, lifting his saber up and slicing through the neck of the Sith Lord.

Anakin stared at the vacant eyes of the severed head for a moment, relishing the moment. He couldn’t deny how good it had felt to kill his master. But the moment was short lived as Mas Amedda, Palpatine’s assistant, burst into the room, alarmed by the ruckus he’d heard from within.

“What is going on?” he demanded. And then he stopped as his eyes spied the severed head of the chancellor. He looked up at Anakin, but before he could say a word, Anakin had reached him and with one deadly slice of his lightsaber, killed him where he stood.

Anakin ran out of the office, panic now starting to set in as he realized what he had done. Blue robed guards tried to stop him, but were Force pushed away as Anakin raced for the stairwell, knowing that security would be alerted and the lifts watched. With heart pounding in his chest, he raced down the stairs, taking them five and six at a time in his desperation to escape.

Finally he made it to the level where the hangar bay was, and was met with curious looks from the small handful of beings who were there making their way to their own crafts. Anakin ignored them, and ran to his own fighter, sliding across the front of it and into the cockpit. Within moments he was airborne, as from behind him he heard the alarm klaxons sounding. He ignored them and raced out into traffic, dodging vessels in his escape to the atmosphere. *Where do I go now?* He thought frantically as he piloted the ship higher and higher away from the planet. He knew he could not go to Naboo; the Jedi knew of his association there, and that would be the first place they’d look. No, a more remote location, a more obscure refuge was in order. Setting his course, Anakin made the calculations for the jump to hyperspace. And when the computer signaled that all was clear, his fighter jumped into the vortex of light speed and disappeared.

Naboo

A pleasant evening breeze lifted off of Lake Varykino as Padmé stood on the terrace. Her sister was busy putting the girls to bed, with the help of their grandmother, and Padmé found craving some time alone.

So much had happened in the past week that she was finding it hard to assimilate. Learning she was going to be a mother of twins was both exciting and terrifying at once. Under normal circumstances she would be content just to take the time to dwell on this new development in her life, but things were happening so quickly that she'd been denied the luxury of doing so. Now she had other things to worry about, namely, Anakin's confrontation with Palpatine.

Despite the great strides Anakin had taken in the past several weeks since she had married him, Padmé knew that he still had a long way to go. And yet, the fact that he recognized this as well gave her hope. He himself knew that he was still vulnerable to the Dark Side, and that would, hopefully, keep him safe from its grasp.

"Lovely evening, isn't it?"

Padmé turned to see Obi-Wan standing beside her on the terrace. "Yes it is," she said.

Obi-Wan had felt a tremendous surge of Darkness in the Force, and was deeply troubled by it. He had a feeling that he knew from whence it had come. And while it didn't surprise him, it unnerved him in its intensity.

Padmé watched him as he looked at the lake below. "Something on your mind?" she asked.

Obi-Wan was surprised by her question and looked at her. "Why do you ask?" he asked her casually.

"You seem preoccupied," she commented.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Indeed," he replied. "So do you."

Padmé turned away and looked back at the lake. "I'm worried about Anakin," she told him.

Obi-Wan nodded. "So am I, Padmé," he admitted. "So am I."

Padmé frowned. "You think he's gone to kill Palpatine, don't you?" she asked.

Obi-Wan said nothing for a while, not sure if he ought to be honest with her or not. "I think he is doing what he feels he must," he said at last. "And while I do not condone revenge, if anyone was deserving of it, it's Anakin."

"Now I'm really worried," she said quietly, and then walked back into the house to be alone with her thoughts.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Outer Rim

Anakin had set his course for Tatooine, reasoning that he could stay with his mother until things blew over. He only hoped that the Jedi were quicker in their exoneration of him than they'd been in their investigation of Palpatine. The thought of being parted from Padmé, particularly now that she was expecting, was unbearable to him.

He had just made the reversion from light speed when the fuel indicator started to flash. In his haste to leave Coruscant, he hadn't thought to check how much fuel was in his fighter. And now there was none, and he was still too far from the planet surface to make a safe landing.

"Great," he muttered, thinking frantically. He's landed in difficult situations before, but somehow that didn't make him feel any better. Tatooine was a back water planet, with no authorities to alert for assistance. He was on his own.

It wasn't long before the controls of the ship started to malfunction, and soon after that they stopped working altogether. The ship was a projectile, hurtling towards the planet's atmosphere, with its pilot helpless to guide its course. *Good thing sand is soft*, he reflected grimly as the ship started to heat up in the atmosphere. Anakin grimaced as the ship began to shake and started its descent towards the planet surface.

Tatooine –near the settlement of Wayfar

Enna Mendosa was up early, as was her custom, collecting mushrooms that grew in the scant moisture that the vaporators gave off before the heat of the suns blasted it into oblivion. She had just started her walk back to the homestead when she heard an unusual sound. Turning around, she was astonished to see a ship hurtling towards the planet surface at a terrific speed. Torn between curiosity and terror, she hesitated, but only for a moment before she started to run towards the homestead. The sounds of metal crumpling and screeching stopped her in her tracks, and she turned once more. *There's someone in there*, she thought; *someone needs help*.

"What the devil..."

Enna looked back to see her father standing at the edge of large, circular pit that housed their homestead.

"The ship just crashed," she told him. "We have to help whoever is in there."

The man nodded, and then started at a run towards the ship, with his daughter at his side.

Coruscant

It wasn't long before the news of the assassination of Chancellor Palpatine had spread all over the capital. Among the first to learn the news were the Jedi Council. Yoda, Mace Windu and a couple of other Jedi went directly to the chancellor's office to investigate for themselves. What they found there was a grisly scene that left them all horrified and shocked.

"Certain we are that Skywalker did this?" Yoda asked.

Windu nodded as he watched the forensics team remove evidence from the room. "Who else could have killed him in this way?" he asked. "His head was sliced off with a lightsaber. Skywalker is the only one outside of the Jedi who owns one."

"Look at this, Master Windu," Saesee Tinn pointed out. "Burn marks. This looks like Sith lightning to me."

"I'd have to agree," Windu stated grimly. He frowned. "Why would he do this?" he asked in exasperation. "He knew we were on his side, he knew that we would deal with Palpatine! Why did he take matters into his own hands?"

"The Dark Side still has a hold of Skywalker," Yoda stated solemnly.

"Perhaps we ought to watch the surveillance footage before we jump to any conclusion," suggested Ki-Adi Mundi. "It may shed some light onto what actually happened here today."

"I think it's pretty clear what happened," Saesee Tinn spoke up.

"Yes, but there could be more to this confrontation than we know," Ki-Adi countered. "We cannot assume the worst of Skywalker without first looking at all the evidence."

Yoda nodded. "Agree with Master Mundi I do," he said. "Study this situation we must to find the truth. Help Skywalker we will if we can."

"And if we decide he cannot be trusted?" Tinn asked. "What then?"

"He has left Coruscant," Windu pointed out. "It won't be easy to find him if he is hiding."

Yoda sighed, disappointment filling him. He had been so sure that Anakin was the Chosen One; how could he have been wrong?? "Then find him we must," he said at last.

Tatooine

"Is he dead?"

Enna shook her head. "No, but he's pretty badly hurt," she said. She'd been attending the unconscious stranger for nearly two hours and he had shown no signs of regaining consciousness. They had learned very little from him in that time, only that he owned a lightsaber, which made him a Jedi Knight, and that he was very young.

"He needs to go to a hospital, Dad," she told her father, looking up at him. Her mother now stood in the room as well, an expression of worry on her face.

"We don't have the money for that, girl," her father reminded her tersely. "And you know it."

Enna frowned, knowing he was right. "What if he dies?" she said quietly.

"He's not gonna die," her mother said, approaching the bed. "He's young, he's strong... I think he's just had a nasty bump on the head is all," she commented.

"That would explain why he hasn't woken up," her husband put in.

Enna nodded. "Do you think we could at least get a medidroid to have a look at him?" she asked her parents. "The Coopers have one, and I'm sure they'd lend us the use of it."

"I suppose so," her father replied. 'This is all we need,' he grumbled, leaving the room. "A bed used up and another mouth to feed."

Enna looked at her mother, hoping she'd have a little more compassion for the stranger. "Mom, we can't just let him die," she said. "We have to help him. That's the right thing to do, isn't it?"

Her mother nodded. "Yes it is," she said, putting a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "You're a good girl for wanting to help, Enna."

Enna smiled under her mother's praise, and returned her attention to her patient, who lay still and quiet on the small bed.

Naboo

Ryo and Pooja Naberrie splashed happily in the warm waters as their mother and aunt watched them from the shore. Padmé had tried to immerse herself into the activity, but it was difficult for her to stop thinking about Anakin. She had not heard from him yet, and was growing more concerned with each hour that passed.

Sola noticed how anxious her sister was, and wished there was something she could say to distract her.

"Have you and Anakin talked about having children?" Sola asked at last.

Padmé turned and looked at her sister. "What did you say?" she asked.

Sola smiled. "I asked you if you and Anakin were planning on having children of your own one day," she said.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, definitely," she replied with a smile.

Sola looked at her for a moment. "Is there something you want to tell me, Padmé?" she asked.

Padmé hesitated before speaking, but was prevented from doing so by Darred arriving at the beach.

"Padmé, there's something on the holonews I think you ought to see," he said.

Padmé looked up at him with a frown. "What is it?" she asked.

Darred looked at his wife and then back at his sister-in-law. "Palpatine has been killed," he told her. "It's all over the news."

Padmé jumped to her feet at once, the anxiety she'd felt all day morphing into cold fear. She ran up the path to the house without another word, leaving Sola and her husband alone on the beach.

"I'd think she'd be happy to hear that," Darred commented.

Sola nodded, watching her sister retreating up the path. "Yes, so did I," she replied with a frown.

Padmé didn't stop running until she reached the house and then ran to the large common room where her parents still had the holonews on. They both looked up at her when she entered the room.

"What happened?" she asked, although she felt as though she already knew. "What..." she stopped as the face of her husband appeared on the news.

Security holos have confirmed that the chancellor was assassinated by this man, Darth Vader, whose whereabouts are now unknown.

Padmé sat down slowly as she listened to the report being repeated, the sense of dread within her growing exponentially. "Oh, Anakin," she whispered. "Why, Ani, why?"

Obi-Wan stood in the room as well, watching the news broadcast in silence. While he wasn't surprised that Anakin had taken matters into his own hands, he was nevertheless unnerved by the brutality of his revenge. He frowned, knowing that the Jedi would no doubt look with disapproval at the incident. He ran a hand over his beard in frustration, and looked over at Padmé, who looked as unsettled as he was.

"Where do you think he went, Padmé?" Jobal asked her. "Do you think he'd come back here?"

"No," Padmé replied. "He wouldn't put me in that position."

"I agree," Obi-Wan spoke up. "He knows as of right now he's a wanted man, so he's gone somewhere to lay low."

"But the Jedi will clear him, won't they?" Padmé asked him. "Now that they know the truth about Palpatine?"

Obi-Wan looked at her, wishing he could tell her what she wanted to hear, but knowing it would be irresponsible of him to give her false hopes. "I don't know, Padmé," he told her at last. "I can't say for sure."

Padmé frowned. "What do you mean you can't say?" she cried. "If it weren't for Anakin, Palpatine would have destroyed the entire Jedi Order! They owe him, Obi-Wan! Surely they can see that!"

"No one can guarantee the actions of another, Padmé," Obi-Wan told her. "All I can tell you is that I will do what I must to help. I promised Anakin that I would help him, and I meant it."

"And what if that promise brings you into conflict with your Jedi beliefs?" Ruwee asked. "What then?"

Obi-Wan remained silent for a moment as he considered this. "While I hope it doesn't come to that, I won't turn my back on Anakin. Or you," he added, looking at Padmé.

Padmé nodded, grateful for his loyalty. “Do you think we ought to go back to the capital?” she asked. “Now that Palpatine is dead it would be safe for me to return, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I believe so,” Obi-Wan replied.

“What is your hurry to leave, Padmé?” Jobal asked. “We’ve hardly spent any time together at all.”

“I want to be there to help plead Anakin’s case,” she told her mother. ‘I want to be there when his name is dragged through the mud by the media to defend him,’ she added. “I’m not going to let him go through this alone.”

Obi-Wan nodded, reflecting that the Force could not have chosen a more suitable mate for the Chosen One. “Very well,” he said, “we’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

Chapter 41

Chapter 41

Chapter 41

Tatooine

Nearly thirty-six hours had passed since Enna Mendosa and her father had brought an injured stranger into their home. During that time they had called upon the services of a neighbor's medical droid to examine their patient, who had not regained consciousness during that time. It had told them what they had already suspected; that the young man had sustained a serious blow to the head, and that was what was causing him to remain unconscious. The droid had set about tending to the many abrasions and cuts that the pilot had incurred during his crash, but aside from that, there wasn't much more that the droid could do. The young man was strong and fit, and would, in time, regain consciousness.

"Who do you think he is?" Enna asked her mother as they sat vigil with the young man late one afternoon.

"I'd have to guess that he's a Jedi," Rana Mendosa said. "He has one of those fancy laser swords."

Enna nodded. "I wonder what he was doing out here," she mused. "And why he crashed."

"Your father had a look at the ship," her mother told her. "Aside from the damage in the crash, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it."

Enna frowned. "That's weird," she commented. "Jedi are supposed to be excellent pilots."

Mrs. Mendosa looked up at her daughter. "And how do you know so much about the Jedi?" she asked.

Enna blushed. "Well, I think they're interesting," she said, looking at the handsome face of the unconscious young man. "So mysterious, so powerful..."

"Now that will be quite enough of that, miss," her mother chastised her. "Don't get any silly notions in your head about this man."

"I have no notions, Mom," Enna assured her. "Still, he is awfully handsome, isn't he?"

Rana frowned. "Enna, you're starting to worry me," she said. "Come on; time to get dinner on the table."

Reluctantly Enna stood up and left the room with her mother, but not before one more backward glance at the sleeping man.

Naboo

Obi-Wan and Padmé left Theed early the next morning, bound for Coruscant. They spoke very little to one another on the trip, for both were absorbed in their own thoughts and

worries.

"Where would he have gone, Padmé?" Obi-Wan asked at one point. "Do you have any idea?"

"Tatooine would be my guess," she said. "To his mother. Where else would he go?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Logical," he said. "Perhaps that ought to be our next destination, once we have determined the status of the Jedi's investigation."

Padmé frowned. "Investigation? What is there to investigate?" she asked. "If they hadn't taken so long in their initial investigation, Anakin may not have done this."

"Yes, very true," Obi-Wan admitted. "But you have you understand that the Jedi do things in their own way, Padmé. They have done things this way for a thousand generations. It is rather hard to change such an established order."

"Perhaps," she replied. "But perhaps it's time they did change. Think of it, Obi-Wan; were it not for Anakin, the Jedi Order would have become extinct. And why? Because they are too proud and too blind to see what's under their own noses."

Obi-Wan said nothing in reply, but he couldn't help but agree with her. The Jedi owed their very existence now to a man who had defied every edict the Jedi lived by, who contradicted virtually every belief they held sacred. Was it time for a change? Would revealing Anakin Skywalker as the Chosen One force the Jedi to change?

"Stand by," he told her, "we're about to revert to sublight speed."

"Acknowledged," she replied.

Tatooine

Anakin awoke in a miasma of pain. Every muscle in his body hurt, his head hurt, and, even though he never imagined it possible, his hair even hurt. But what was more disconcerting than the pain was the sense of disorientation that he felt. He felt as though he were in a fog, a thick, all encompassing fog that made it difficult for him to focus his mind.

Struggling to open his eyes, Anakin winced at even this slight exertion. The only light in the room where he was came from a small window. The shutters were drawn, and yet a thin ray of fading sunlight squeezed through, sending a warm glow into the small room.

Where the hell am I? Anakin asked himself. He tried to sit up, but the room began to spin and so he fell back on the bed once more. Anakin wasn't normally a person who was prone to panic, but as he lay in the unfamiliar room not knowing how he got there he was starting to do just that.

At this point the door to the small chamber opened and a figure appeared in the doorway. They seemed hesitant to enter, but then did so after a moment's deliberation.

"You're awake!" Enna said as she came over to stand beside the bed where her patient lay looking at up at her.

"Where am I?" he murmured, even the effort to speak causing him pain.

"In my home," Enna told him, sitting crossed-legged on the floor beside the bed. "We're near Wayfar, if that helps."

"Wayfar?"

Enna nodded. "Tatooine," she told him, realizing that perhaps he didn't know the backwater planet. "Ever hear of it?"

Tatooine? Tatooine? The name sounded vaguely familiar to him, but Anakin's mind was so unfocused at the moment he didn't know why. "How did I get here?" he asked.

"You crashed," Enna told him. "Me and my father brought you here from the outer edges of our property."

Anakin frowned. Why didn't he remember any of this? Surely crashing onto a strange planet wasn't something he did every day; so why was the memory of it simply not there? He peered at the girl, her face totally unfamiliar to him. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Enna Mendosa," she told him with a smile. "My parents are Kaleb and Rana Mendosa," she added for good measure.

Anakin closed his eyes, starting to grow exhausted. "Thank you for helping me, Miss Mendosa," he said weakly.

"You don't need to thank me," she replied cheerfully. "What's your name?"

Anakin opened his mouth to reply, but stopped. *What is my name?? What the hell is my NAME?*

"S... sky..." he stammered. 'I don't remember,' he admitted with alarm. "I don't remember my name!"

Enna frowned, seeing that he was getting agitated. She stood up and walked over to him, sitting on the tiny edge of the bed that Anakin's large body didn't occupy. "It's okay," she assured him gently. 'You had a really bad hit on the head,' she went on to explain. "The medidroid mentioned that might be a possibility," she added.

But Anakin wasn't reassured by this. "This can't be happening," he groaned. "I have to be somewhere... I'm sure of it!"

"Yeah, probably," Enna agreed. "But until you're better, and until you know where you need to be, there's no sense worrying about it, right Sky?"

Sky? "That's not my name," he grumbled.

"No, but for now it will do," she replied. "You want a drink? You must be thirsty. You've been asleep for almost two whole days."

Anakin nodded. "I am," he agreed.

Enna stood up. "I'll be right back," she told him and then left the room again.

Anakin closed his eyes. *This is a nightmare... I'll wake up from it soon... I'm dreaming... I have to be dreaming...* He closed his eyes, trying his best to remain calm, hoping that his nightmare would soon be over.

Elsewhere on Tatooine

Shmi had just started to clean up the breakfast dishes when she heard voices from above. Unfamiliar voices. Frowning, she walked out of the kitchen and into the courtyard, dishrag still in hand. She stopped in her tracks when she saw her daughter-in-law and an unfamiliar Jedi Knight walking towards her. Immediately she grew alarmed.

“Padmé?” she asked, walking over to her. “What are you doing here?? Where’s Anakin?”

Padmé frowned. “He’s not here??” she asked as she reached Shmi.

Shmi shook her head, her eyes moving to Obi-Wan questioningly.

“Shmi, this is Master Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Padmé said. “Obi-Wan, my mother-in-law, Shmi Lars.”

“An honor to meet you, Mrs. Lars,” said Obi-Wan with a bow.

Shmi nodded and then looked back at Padmé. “Please tell me what’s going on,” she asked in alarm.

“Perhaps we could go inside and discuss this,” Obi-Wan suggested. “This is... rather complicated.”

Shmi nodded, and then lead the pair into the house.

“Anakin has killed Chancellor Palpatine,” Padmé told Shmi once they had seated themselves at the dining room table.

Shmi wasn’t surprised. “He had planned to do that,” she commented.

Padmé nodded. “That was his original intention, but he had agreed to wait for the Jedi,” she said. “They were going to arrest Palpatine, but something happened. I believe Palpatine must have done something to provoke him. I don’t know what, but he’s a wanted man now. His face is all over the Holonet.”

“Oh no,” Shmi gasped softly.

“Anakin has fled the capital,” Obi-Wan continued, picking up where Padmé had left off. “We thought he might come have here, but obviously he has not,” he concluded with a frown.

“No, he hasn’t,” Shmi said. She thought for a moment. “Where could he be then? Would he have gone to your home world, Padmé?”

“I was there when this happened,” Padmé explained. ‘He didn’t come to Naboo.’ She stopped as a wave of fear came over her. She looked at Obi-Wan. “What if he’s hurt somewhere? What if he was injured in the fight with Palpatine and is hurt and alone somewhere, unable to seek help?” she asked as panic started to creep into her voice.

Obi-Wan didn’t want to reassure her too quickly, for the very same thought had crossed his own mind. “The Jedi have no doubt begun an investigation,” he added.

“And how will that help Anakin?” Shmi asked pointedly, never having been a woman to mince her words.

“The Jedi will exonerate Anakin once they have concluded their investigation,” Obi-Wan replied.

“If they take as long with this investigation as they did the first one, it may be too late to help Anakin,” Padmé commented bitterly.

Obi-Wan sighed. “Let us hope it doesn’t come to that,” he replied. ‘Anakin is a resourceful young man,’ he added. “I’m sure he will be fine.”

Padmé and Shmi looked at one another, neither of them reassured by his words.

“And in the meantime?” Padmé asked finally. “What am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

Obi-Wan looked at her, feeling how worried she was. He thought he sensed something else, but felt he would be too familiar to pry. “That’s all any of us can do,” he replied, realizing how lame this sounded. “And trust in the Force that Anakin will return to us soon.”

Padmé sighed, running a hand over her brow. *You can place your trust in the Force, Obi-Wan*, she thought to herself. *I intend to do more than that to find my husband.*

Chapter 42

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En route to Coruscant

Padmé was very contemplative on the trip back to Coruscant. Obi-Wan could sense how worried she was, but there was a look of determination in her eyes that he had seen before. He had seen in ten years earlier on Naboo when as a young queen she had taken on the Trade Federation that was threatening the safety of her planet. Right now she seemed as though she was ready to take on the universe in order to save the man that she loved.

“You’re planning something, aren’t you?” Obi-Wan said at last.

Padmé looked at him. “Yes of course I am,” she replied. “I’m not about to leave Anakin out there somewhere. He could be hurt, he could be in trouble. I need to help him.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, of course,” he agreed. ‘We’ll be at Coruscant shortly,’ he told her. “I’m going to the Council to learn the status of the investigation.”

“I’d like to know that as well,” she told him.

“Then why don’t you come with me to the Council?” he suggested.

She was surprised by his suggestion. “Will they allow it?” she asked.

“Of course,” he replied. ‘You are highly respected among the Council members, Padmé,’ he told her. “Besides, they know you have a personal stake in this.”

“Even if they don’t approve of it,” she put in.

Obi-Wan smiled. “The Jedi are forbidden to have personal attachments,” he told her. “That doesn’t mean they disapprove of them in general. And besides, I strongly believe that it was his marriage to you that has caused this change in him.”

“Anakin has lived under Palpatine’s thumb for so long he didn’t know any other emotions but anger and fear,” she told him. “I simply reminded him that there was more inside of him than merely the dark emotions that Palpatine allowed him to feel.”

Obi-Wan glanced at her. “You underestimate yourself,” he told her. He looked over at the navi-computer as it began to announce the approach of the Coruscant system. “Here we go,” he said.

Padmé watched with growing impatience as they made their reversion to sublight. *Hold on, Ani, she thought. I’m coming.*

Tatooine

When Anakin awoke again he found that he was feeling better. Except for the headache. He tried to sit up, holding his head as he did so. He had no idea how long he’d been here, no

idea what day it was. And still, to his dismay, he had no idea who he was.

“Good morning,” Enna said as she entered the room. She carried a tray with some food on it. “Are you hungry?”

Anakin nodded, realizing suddenly that he starved.

“Here you go,” she said, handing him the tray. “It’s not too fancy, but it will make you stronger anyway.”

Anakin looked down at the meal which consisted of some sort of hot cereal, a cut up piece of fruit and a glass of some blue liquid.

“Thanks,” he said. “Looks great.”

Enna smiled, pleased with his praise. She plopped herself down on the floor, watching Anakin in undisguised fascination. Anakin noticed, but chose to ignore her. He was simply too hungry.

“How old are you?” Enna asked finally.

Anakin looked up at her with surprise. “How old are *you*?” he countered.

“I’m nearly fifteen,” Enna replied proudly.

Anakin nodded. “I have no idea how old I am,” he told her.

“Haven’t you remembered anything?” she asked after a moment or two.

Anakin shook his head.

“Nothing? Not even your name?” she persisted.

“Nope,” he replied with a mouthful of cereal.

Enna frowned. “I’m sorry,” she replied. “Must be scary not knowing who you are, or where you belong.”

Anakin hadn’t thought of it that way. Fear hadn’t been among the myriad of emotions he’d experienced in the past two days. “Frustrating is more like it,” he told her. He took a drink, the taste of it vaguely familiar to him. *I must have had this before*, he reflecting, setting his glass down again. “What has become of my ship?” he asked.

Enna shifted her eyes for a moment. “Oh, that,” she replied.

Anakin had stopped halfway to his mouth, spoon poised in midair. “What do you mean, Oh that?” he asked.

Enna hesitated, but only briefly. “The jawas have sort of... well, taken it. At least parts of it,” she replied.

“What???” Anakin demanded loudly. He regretted shouting immediately, for the pain shot through his head in a great surge. “What do you mean, they’ve taken it? What are jawas?”

“Little creatures that live here,” she told him. “They make a living collecting scrap metal from the desert. I guess they figured your ship was abandoned and decided to take it.”

Anakin forced himself to remain calm. “What’s left?” he asked.

"I don't know," she admitted.

"I need to see it," he decided, setting the tray down and trying to stand up.

"You're not ready to get up," she warned him.

"Yes I am," he countered, gritting his teeth against his battered body's protests. It was at this point that he realized that he was wearing only his shorts. He looked at Enna. "Where are my clothes?" he asked.

"Mom cleaned them," she replied.

"Could I have them back please?" he asked, doing his best to keep his patience.

"I'll see if they're ready," Enna replied, rising to her feet and bounding out the door.

Anakin walked slowly over to the dresser to look in the mirror. His face was bruised and still had several bacta bandages on it, no doubt applied by the medidroid who had treated him. He left them alone, all for one that all but covered his right eye. Ripping it off in frustration, he was dismayed to see a rather ugly gash rising in a vertical line above his eye. It continued below his eye for several more centimeters. *That's going to leave a nice scar*, he reflected, touching it gingerly.

"You shouldn't take those off."

Anakin turned to see a middle aged man standing in the doorway.

"It was driving me nuts," Anakin replied.

The man nodded and entered the room. "Kaleb Mendosa," he said, extending a hand to Anakin.

Anakin shook his hand. "I'm afraid I don't know my name," he admitted.

"So I understand," Kaleb replied. "My daughter's been calling you Sky," he added.

"I guess that will do," Anakin agreed. "For now at least. She told me that the jawas have been after my ship," he said.

"Yeah, I'm afraid so," he replied. "I chased them off a few times, but they're sneaky little bastards," he added.

Anakin nodded. "I want to see it," he said. "My ship or whatever is left of it."

Kaleb nodded. "So Enna says," he replied. "I'll take you to it."

"Thanks," Anakin replied. Then he remembered his state of undress. "Uh... I need some clothes," he said.

Kaleb smiled. "I'll see what I can do."

Jedi Temple—Coruscant

Padmé walked through the corridors of the enormous temple, a sense of awe and even a little intimidation filling her. *No*, she told herself; *don't let them intimidate you. They're mortals after all.*

Their journey ended at a large circular room around which a dozen identical chairs were situated. Only a handful was occupied.

“Welcome back, Master Kenobi,” Mace Windu spoke up as Obi-Wan and Padmé came to stand in the center of the room. “And to you as well, Senator Amidala.”

Padmé nodded in response, glancing at Obi-Wan, hoping he’d take the lead.

“Thank you Master Windu,” Obi-Wan replied with a bow. “Senator Amidala has accompanied me to learn of the outcome of the investigation,” he explained.

“I trust this is acceptable.”

“Most welcome the Senator is,” Yoda said, giving Padmé a warm look. “Sit down,” he said, extending a hand to a pair of empty chairs.

Padmé felt more than a little strange sitting among the Jedi Council, but was determined not to let them intimidate her.

“What conclusions have you come to, Master Yoda?” she asked, cutting straight to the chase. “Are you convinced now that Palpatine was indeed the Sith Lord that my husband warned you about?”

Mace Windu was the first to speak. “Our investigation has not concluded, Senator,” he told her.

Padmé’s eyes widened in alarm. “What do you mean?” she demanded. “Anakin is out there somewhere, possibly hurt, possibly even dying, and you are still not willing to admit that he was right?”

There was an awkward silence following Padmé’s outburst.

“Senator Amidala, accusing the chancellor of the Republic of being a Sith Lord is a very large matter,” Ki-Adi Mundi spoke up. “To do so without ample evidence would be irresponsible,” he added.

“Excuse me, Master Mundi,” Obi-Wan spoke up. ‘Have you viewed the surveillance holo from the afternoon when the chancellor was killed?’ he asked. “I should think it would shed some light on what happened.”

“They did,” Windu spoke up. “Understand, Senator, we believe Anakin. It’s just that...”

“Just that what?” she demanded.

“A holodisc was found on the stairs of the Senate building this morning,” Windu replied. “We think it may have been dropped by Anakin in his haste to escape. We were about to view it, actually. We’re hoping it will give our case the final bit of proof we need.”

Padmé was surprised by this, and said nothing for a moment. “Then by all means,” she said. “Please proceed.”

Windu frowned, and then looked at Obi-Wan.

“I suggest that Senator Amidala has a greater stake than anyone in this,” Obi-Wan said. “She ought to be permitted to view the holo disc as well,” he added.

Yoda nodded. "Very well," he said. "Let us proceed."

Mace Windu stood up and proceeded to the center of the room where a holodisc feeder had risen out of the floor. He fed the disc into the device and then sat back down as it geared up.

In a few moments the image of Padmé's office appeared, with her seated at her desk. She looked up as someone entered the room. It was Palpatine.

The Jedi watched in silence as they watched the conversation between Palpatine and Padmé unfold. Padmé watched too, the fear and loathing she'd felt at that moment filling her again.

If you refuse, I will see to it that you live to see every member of your family eradicated.

You wouldn't! You'd never get away with it!

Please, Senator. You know better than that. And if you doubt my resolve, simply ask your beloved husband about the imprudence of crossing me.

The Jedi watched in shock as Palpatine cold-bloodedly threatened Padmé and her entire family unless she left her husband.

There was a long silence after the holo had concluded, and then Yoda spoke up.

"Enough evidence we have," he said grimly. "Prepare a statement to the Senate we must."

Windu nodded, and then looked at Padmé. "Perhaps you'd like to help us with that, Senator," he suggested.

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she replied. "I would."

Chapter 43

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Coruscant

Anakin was very disappointed when he saw what was left of his ship. The jawas had been very efficient in their scavenging job, for there was far too little left to even consider repairs.

“Damn jawas,” Kaleb muttered as they stood looking at the carcass of the fighter.

Anakin frowned. “I can’t stay here,” he said. “I have to go home. Now how do I do that without a ship?”

Kaleb looked at him, not feeling the need to point out that as of now Anakin didn’t even know where home was. “You can always hire someone to take you,” he suggested.

“That would require money,” Anakin pointed out. “I don’t believe I brought too much of that with me.”

Kaleb sighed, rubbing his stubbly chin thoughtfully. “Well... I know someone who would buy what’s left of this from you,” he said. “It may not be much, but it’s a start.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I suppose so,” he replied.

“You know I’d help you out if I could, son,” Kaleb said. “But we barely have enough to make ends meet ourselves.”

“I know that,” Anakin replied. “Please, don’t even consider it. But... maybe you could help me find a way to earn the money.”

“You mean a job?” Kaleb asked.

“Yes, a job,” Anakin said. “Maybe in town,” he suggested.

Kaleb considered this for a moment. “I’ll see what I can find for you,” he said at last. “However you’re not in any shape right now to be working anyhow,” he pointed out.

“Maybe not at a job,” Anakin agreed. ‘Not yet. But maybe there’s something around here I can help you with,’ he added. “I really appreciate your daughter’s care, but I’ll go crazy if I just stay in that bed,” he said.

Kaleb laughed. “I can imagine,” he said. ‘Well, I have a vaporator that isn’t working,’ he said. “Are you any good at fixing things?”

“I guess we’ll see, won’t we?” Anakin replied with a smile.

Kaleb nodded, and then lead Anakin out to the fields where the vaporators were situated.

Coruscant

The Senate was abuzz with discussions and conjecturing when Padmé arrived flanked by Obi-Wan Kenobi and Mace Windu. She took a deep breath as they stepped into her pod and moved towards the center of the enormous arena.

With the death of Palpatine and Mas Amedda, a minor official from Palpatine's office was at the podium, trying desperately to get the large unruly crowd to come to order. Since the death of Palpatine the Senate had been cast into virtual chaos, not knowing what the future held.

"Honorable members!" the official called, trying to get their attention. "Honorable members please!"

After a few moments, the senators became quiet.

"Senator Amidala from Naboo has the floor," the man said, only too happy to pass the spotlight to Padmé.

"Honorable Senators," Padmé began. "I come before you today with dire news. After a thorough investigation, the Jedi Council has come to the inescapable conclusion that the now deceased Chancellor Palpatine was, in fact, a Sith Lord."

Shouts of disbelief were heard throughout the arena at this. Padmé looked up at the podium where the speaker was doing his best to restore quiet. After a few moments he managed to do so and Padmé continued.

"Palpatine had great plans for the future of the Republic," she went on to say. "Plans to further his own position as ultimate and supreme leader. He had the clone army created before this assembly sanctioned it in order to help him realize his plans. He planned to destroy the entire Jedi Order with the help of this army and establish a new dictatorship, with him as the undisputed and unchallenged ruler of the galaxy."

The cries out outrage and disbelief were very loud and very angry this time. Many believed her, and shouted their indignation; others did not, and shouted directly at Padmé, disclaiming her outrageous accusations.

At this point, the Jedi stepped forward, much to Padmé's relief. Mace Windu held up one hand, looking around at the crowd with an air of authority.

"Good Senators!" he called, "good Senators, please!"

It took a few moments, but eventually the crowd stopped their shouting and gave him their attention.

"Senator Amidala has told you the truth," Windu said. "We have conducted an extensive investigation, and have learned that Chancellor Palpatine was indeed a Sith Lord. And as a Sith, he had designs on ruling the galaxy. Not through democracy, but with terror and draconian measures of control. The clone army was designed to follow his every command, no matter how excessive. Those orders included killing every last Jedi in the galaxy. If this is not proof of his malevolent intentions, then we have further proof. We know now that the Chancellor threatened to kill the family of Senator Amidala if she did not end her marriage to his protégé, Darth Vader."

Windu had to wait while the senators digested this shocking news with loud comments and shouts of incredulity. Obi-Wan took this opportunity to say his piece and held up his hand for silence.

“Senators,” he shouted to be heard. They quieted down once more and listened. “There is one more truth that we must acknowledge at this point, and that is this. Darth Vader has saved the Republic from a very great danger by killing Chancellor Palpatine. Not only did he prevent the genocide of the Jedi Order, but he prevented a despotic madman from taking control of the Republic. For this reason, we move that Vader be exonerated of the charges of murder that he has been accused of. Vader is a hero, ladies and gentlemen, and ought to be treated as such. The Republic owes him a great debt of gratitude, Senators. For that reason I move that the charges against him are dropped.”

“Master Kenobi,” the official at the podium spoke up. “Only a member of this body may make a motion,” he felt compelled to point out.

Obi-Wan lifted his eyebrows and looked at Windu, who merely shook his head in disbelief.

“In that case,” Padmé spoke up, “I move that all charges against Darth Vader, Anakin Skywalker, be dropped.”

“I second that!” one senator shouted out.

Soon the motion was almost unanimous, with only a few of Palpatine’s loyal cronies still objecting. But they were overruled by the majority, and the motion was carried.

“It is the decision of this democratic body that the charges of murder against Darth Vader be dropped,” the official in charge said in a loud voice. “This meeting is adjourned.”

Padmé turned to Obi-Wan, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “Thank you,” she said softly. “Thank you so much.”

Obi-Wan smiled at her. “It was my honor to serve, Senator,” he replied with a bow.

Tatooine

Kaleb Mendosa was more than pleased to learn that the young man he’d taken in was a very gifted mechanic. By mid-afternoon Anakin had fixed the three malfunctioning vaporators and had begun working on a droid in the homestead garage. He was finding that fixing things came easily to him, and this realization gave him a degree of comfort. It was a small connection to his past, a piece of the puzzle that he still had yet to solve. And besides that, it was easier to forget his troubles when he was engrossed in fixing something.

“Mom asked me to tell you that supper was ready,” Enna announced as she entered the garage.

Anakin looked up from his task and nodded. “I’ll be right there,” he said.

Enna watched him for a moment, her fascination for him only growing as she saw how easily he was able to affect repairs to the droid that had been giving her father trouble for weeks. “You’re really good at that,” she commented.

“I guess so,” he replied without looking up. “It seems to come easily to me.”

Enna nodded. "Maybe when you're finished with that you could help me with a swoop bike I've been hoping to fix," she said.

Anakin looked up. "Swoop bike?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, walking towards the back of the garage. A large tarp covered the bike, and she pulled it back to show him. "See?"

Anakin walked over to look at the bike, interested at once. "You were going to fix this?" he asked.

Enna blushed. "Well, I really wouldn't know where to start," she admitted. 'But since you are so good at fixing stuff, maybe you would. I could help,' she offered. "I'd love to learn how to fix things as well as you do."

Anakin smiled. "Well, we'll see if I have time," he said. "Your dad is trying to find me a job."

"Oh," Enna replied, more than a little disappointed. "What do you need a job for?"

"Money," Anakin replied, returning to the droid. "I need to buy passage off of here since my ship is gone."

Enna nodded as she followed him. "But you don't know where to go, remember?" she asked.

"Yes, I know that," he replied. "But I will remember sooner or later, I'm sure of it."

"How can you be so sure?" she asked.

Anakin shrugged as he picked up a tool once more. "Just...things. Familiar things. And dreams."

"You had a dream?" she asked.

"Yeah," Anakin replied, "There was a woman in it," he told her. "I'm wondering if she's someone important in my life."

Enna felt a brief stab of jealousy at hearing this. "Maybe she's your girlfriend," she offered. "Was she pretty?" she asked, hoping against hope that she wasn't.

"She was gorgeous," Anakin replied with a smile. 'Big brown eyes, long, curly hair,' he said. "And her smile..." he stopped when he remembered he was talking to a fourteen year old child. "Never mind," he said, returning to his work.

"ENNA! SUPPER!"

"Oh right," Enna said. "It's supper time. You coming, Sky?"

"Yes I'm coming," he replied, setting the tool down. He suddenly felt very tired, and the thought of a good meal appealed to him tremendously. "I'm starving."

Chapter 44

Chapter 44

Coruscant — Office of Senator Amidala

“Gentlemen, I have asked you here today for a very important mission,” Padmé said as she sat at her desk. In front of the desk stood five of the Republic’s most notorious and effective bounty hunters. Padmé had called them into her office for a very express purpose: to find her husband.

“I want each of you to choose a different sector,” she continued. “And once you’ve exhausted the search of that one, you will choose another, and then another until you find him.”

“Who, Milady?” one alien asked.

“My husband,” Padmé replied. ‘Darth Vader. He’s been missing for four days,’ she told him. “He was last seen at the Senate, and presumably left Coruscant from there.”

“You want him dead or alive, Senator?” a second bounty hunter asked.

“You will not as much as come close to him,” Padmé said, alarmed by the question. “Do you understand? If any harm comes to him as a result of your search, I will put a bounty on *your* head.”

The bounty hunters looked at one another, impressed by Padmé’s gutsiness.

“When you find him, I want you to report to me immediately,” she went on. “Is that understood?”

“Yes.”

“Got it.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Yeah.”

“No problem.”

“Good,” Padmé said, nodding her head. ‘Your reward will make your efforts well worth your while,’ she told them, appealing to their inherent greed. “Find him, and find him quickly. The quicker you do, the greater your reward will be.” She let these words sink in for a moment and then dismissed the motley crew. Sitting down at her desk, Padmé let out a long sigh. She was tired, for she hadn’t slept much in days. She knew that she wouldn’t sleep well until Anakin was back home where he belonged.

Tatooine

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Anakin frowned, not exactly convinced. "It doesn't sound fun," he retorted.

She laughed, and splashed the water of the hot tub in his direction. "Don't be so boring," she retorted.

"I'm not boring," he replied, trying to ignore her taunts. Her response was another splash directed at his face. "You're going to continue that until I agree to this childish game, aren't you?"

She nodded with a smile.

Anakin sighed melodramatically. "Very well," he said. "But I get to go first."

"Go ahead," she replied.

"Which do you want?"

She thought for a moment. "Truth," she decided.

Anakin smiled, determined to make it a good one. "Did that idiot Palo ever turn you on?"

Her mouth opened in shock at the question. "What kind of a..."

"This is your game, remember?" he replied, deciding that perhaps this game wasn't so boring after all.

She frowned. "Okay, okay," she replied. "No, he didn't. Not once, not even a little."

Anakin's smile grew. "Now, why doesn't that surprise me?" he asked.

Her reply was another splash in his face.

"Okay my turn," she said. "What will it be?"

"Dare," he said, figuring that she's never come up with anything that he couldn't do easily.

She thought for a moment and then started to giggle.

"What?" he asked.

"No, it's too much," she replied. "You'd never do it."

"Try me," he replied.

"Okay," she said. "When dinner comes, I dare you to answer the door naked."

"Is that all?" he asked with a grin.

"You'll never do it," she insisted. "Not in a million years."

"You don't know me very well," he told her.

She laughed.

Anakin awoke at this point, the images of his dream still vivid in his mind. He'd dreamed of her again, the beautiful woman with big brown eyes. They were in a hot tub together, naked. Obviously she must be rather special to me if I did that, he reasoned. My wife... she has to be my wife. He frowned as he tried desperately to remember her name, but it still

evaded him. Deciding that to dwell on it would only frustrate him, Anakin arose, and got dressed.

“Good news, Sky,” Kaleb said as Anakin joined the family at breakfast. “I think I landed a job for you.”

“Really? That’s great!” Anakin replied. “Where? What kind of job?”

“My brother just bought a junk shop in Mos Espa,” Kabeb said as he stirred his caff. “Says he got it for a song. Apparently the former owner was murdered right on the premises!”

“Well I know *I’ll* never set foot in that shop,” Rana muttered.

“What kind of work will I be doing?” Anakin asked.

“Fixing things,” Kaleb replied. “I told him what a whiz you are at repairs. I can take you up there this morning if you want to talk to him.”

“Yes I would,” Anakin replied. “Thanks a lot, this is great news. With the money I got from the rest of my ship, I’ll hopefully make enough for passage home in no time. That is, if I can remember where home is,” he added with a frown.

“Don’t worry lad,” Kabeb said. “Your memory will come back, I’m sure of it.”

Anakin nodded as he commenced eating his breakfast, hoping that his host was right.

Coruscant

Padmé sat in the waiting area of her doctor’s office, growing more impatient with each minute that passed. She glanced at her wrist chrono for the umpteenth time and frowned when she saw that she’d been waiting for thirty minutes already. Finally a medidroid called out her name and she stood up and walked to the back of the office.

“Hello Padmé,” Larissa Norchamp said as she stood up from her desk. “I’m sorry you had to wait for so long.”

Padmé merely smiled in response, not trusting herself not to say something that wouldn’t sound annoyed. She sat down in the chair that the doctor offered her.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

“I’m pregnant,” Padmé said.

Larissa looked very surprised, for this was the last thing she expected Padmé to say. “Oh?” she said. “Haven’t you been taking shots? I’m sure you have,” she added.

“Yes I have,” Padmé replied. “But I still managed to conceive.”

“You did a home test?” Larissa asked.

Padmé shook her head. “No, I haven’t actually,” she admitted.

The doctor frowned. “So... how can you be so sure?” she asked.

Padmé wasn’t sure how to respond to this. “Well, I’ve missed a period,” she said at last.

Larissa nodded, not terribly convinced. “Any other symptoms?”

“Fatigue,” Padmé said.

“Well, let’s take some blood and run a test just to be sure,” Larissa suggested.

Padmé nodded, getting the distinct impression that her physician was very skeptical. She smiled, imagining how surprised she’d be when the test came back positive.

Tatooine — Mos Espa

“Good to see you, Jonn,” Kaleb said as he shook his brother’s hand. “I appreciate what you’re doing here.”

Jonn smiled. “I haven’t done anything yet,” he said good-naturedly. He turned to Anakin. “You must be the young man my brother’s been telling me about,” he added.

Anakin nodded, extending a hand to the man. “I’m afraid I don’t know my name,” he said.

“We’ve just been calling him Sky,” Kaleb told his brother. “It’s all he can remember of his name, isn’t that right?” he asked Anakin.

“Yes, unfortunately,” he said. He looked back at Jonn. “I really appreciate you agreeing to meet me,” he said.

Jonn nodded, deciding he liked the young man. “Well, as you can see this place is a real mess,” he said as they walked through the shop. “It’s gonna take a hell of a lot of work to get it up and running.”

Anakin nodded. “I’ll do whatever you need me to do,” he assured him.

Jonn smiled. “I like your attitude, Sky,” he said. “The job’s yours. You got a place to stay? Wayfar is bit far to commute,” he added.

Anakin frowned. He hadn’t thought of that. “No,” he admitted. “I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Well you can stay with my family for now,” Jonn told him. “We’ve got an extra room since our boy went off to school.”

“How’s Jason doing?” Kaleb asked.

“Good,” Jonn replied. ‘Wants to be a diplomat,’ he added with a wry smile. He looked back at Anakin. “Well? What do you say, young man?” he asked.

“I say, when do I start?” Anakin replied with a smile.

Coruscant

“Well I don’t understand how, but you were right, Padmé,” Larissa stated as she looked up from the test results. “You’re pregnant.”

Padmé smiled. “I did tell you that,” she replied.

“But you came for your shots faithfully,” Larissa said. “I don’t understand how this is possible.”

Padmé simply smiled, not even attempting to offer an explanation.

“So I suppose we ought to set up your first prenatal visit then,” Larissa said. “Let’s go back into my office and we’ll arrange one.”

Padmé left the office a short time later, armed with literature about nutrition and general prenatal care. She headed for her office at the Senate, hoping that there would be some word from one of the bounty hunters she had commissioned to find Anakin. But there were no messages from any of them, much to her great disappointment.

Fighting against the tears that seemed to rise so easily these days, Padmé checked her agenda and did her best to focus on her duties, and not of the ache she felt in her heart that seemed to grow worse each day that Anakin was gone.

Chapter 45

Chapter 45

Coruscant

Anakin was exhausted by the end of the day. He knew that he was pushing himself, but he couldn't concern himself with that now. If he were to get home again, he could not be.

"Well, this place looks a hell of a lot better," Jonn said as he and Kaleb came into the shop from the yard in the back. "You've done a great job, Sky."

"Thanks," Anakin replied, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. He looked around the shop, and for the first time, felt a flash of recognition. He frowned. "You know... I think I've been here before," he said.

"Oh?" Kaleb asked. "You remember it?"

"I wouldn't say that," Anakin replied. "But there's something there, at the edge of my memory... something familiar. I've had that feeling more and more recently."

"Must mean your memory is coming back," Jonn suggested.

"Yes, possibly," he replied. "Not soon enough for me either. I can't tell you how frustrating it is not even knowing your name."

Jonn smiled. "Yeah, I'm sure it must be," he said. "Come on, I think you've earned your wages today. Time to go home. You hungry?"

"Yes," Anakin replied, feeling more tired than anything else.

"Then let's get home," Jonn said. "The wife will have supper on the table by the time we get there."

Anakin smiled, wondering if his wife did the same thing. For some reason, he doubted it highly. "Sounds great," he said. "Thanks again, Jonn. I really appreciate this."

"Hell, after the work you've done today you've more than earned a good meal and a comfortable bed," he replied. "Let's go."

The wives of Kaleb and Jonn had indeed set out a fine spread by the time the three men reached their home.

"Frann, this is the young man I've hired to help out at the shop," Jonn told his wife.

Frann Mendosa looked up and smiled at Anakin. "Nice to meet you," she said. "I've heard quite a lot about you from your young admirer," she added, nodding in Enna's direction. Enna, however, was too absorbed talking with her older cousin, and didn't hear.

Anakin laughed. "Well, don't believe everything you hear," he said. "Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Mendosa," he added. "I'm indebted to you, to all of you," he said.

“Well I believe we’re meant to help one another out,” Frann replied. “The galaxy would be a much kinder place if people did that more.”

Anakin nodded in agreement, the woman’s words reminding him of someone else whose philosophy of life was much the same as hers.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” Jonn suggested. “This looks great, hon,” he added, kissing his wife on the cheek.

Coruscant

“Milady, you’ve barely touched your supper,” Dormé commented.

Padmé looked up at her friend who had come to stay with her while Anakin was away. “I’m just not that hungry, Dormé,” she said.

Dormé frowned. “I know you’re missing Anakin,” she replied. “But you’ll only run yourself down if you don’t eat. You need to keep up your strength.”

“I know,” Padmé replied, pushing the food around on her plate. “To tell you the truth I’m not feeling that great,” she added.

Dormé nodded in understanding. “Well, that was bound to happen eventually,” she said. “How did your appointment go yesterday?”

“Fine,” Padmé replied. “It was just to confirm the pregnancy, even though I really didn’t need any confirmation. Larissa was quite shocked actually,” she added with a smile.

“I can imagine,” Dormé replied. “I’m still rather shocked myself.”

“Well you have to understand something about Anakin,” Padmé told her. “He had no father; his mother simply became pregnant with him. It was as though the Force created him.”

“How is that possible?” Dormé asked.

Padmé shrugged. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “But it does explain how I ended up pregnant even though I was taking shots to prevent it.”

“Well, no birth control is fool proof, Milady,” Dormé pointed out.

“I know that,” Padmé replied. “I don’t think that had anything to do with it though. I think these twins are going to be as strong with the Force as their father is. I only hope that the Jedi don’t have designs on them.”

“They don’t know yet, do they?” Dormé asked.

“No,” Padmé replied. “My parents don’t even know. I did tell Ani’s mother when I was on Tatooine, though.”

“Your parents will be thrilled,” Dormé replied with a smile. “So will Sola.”

Padmé nodded. “Yes, I’m looking forward to telling them once all this is behind us.” Her eyes filled with tears. ‘I miss him, Dormé,’ she said softly. “So much!”

Dormé reached over and put her hand on Padmé’s. “He’ll be home soon,” she said. “I’m sure of it.”

"I hope you're right, Dormé," Padmé replied.

"I was right about you falling in love with him, wasn't I?" she reminded her.

Padmé smiled. "Yes, I know," she replied. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?" she asked.

Dormé shook her head with a smile. "Nope," she replied.

Padmé only laughed in response.

Tatooine

After a pleasant meal, Kaleb and Rana prepared to leave, not wishing to return home in the dark. Enna had begged to stay to prolong her visit with her cousin, Mara, whom she idolized.

"Good luck to you, young man," Kaleb said, shaking Anakin's hand. "And make sure you come and see us when you get the chance."

Anakin nodded. "I will, most definitely," he replied. 'I can't thank you enough for all that you've done for me,' he said, looking at them both. "Once I've found myself again, I want to do something for you both."

"That's not necessary, Sky," Rana said. "We were happy to help."

"We'd better get going," Kaleb said. "I don't want to be driving home in the dark with all those blasted sand people around."

After another round of goodbyes, they left.

"Let me show you where you can sleep," Frann said to Anakin. "You must be tired, Jonn told me what a hard day you put in."

"I am pretty tired actually," Anakin admitted. He followed Frann to the second floor of the apartment to a small room that had been her son's while he was living at home.

"My son loved his toys as a boy," she said with a smile as Anakin noticed a model of a TIE fighter on the dresser. "We keep them out for when he comes home for visits. Pretty silly, I know."

"Not silly at all," Anakin said.

"I'll get you some towels," Frann said walking out the door. "I'll be right back."

Anakin nodded as he continued looking at the model. He felt another wave of familiarity as he looked at it, as though perhaps he'd had one of his own as a child. But the memories were still too elusive to grab a hold of, as though they were just on the edge of his mind.

"Anything else I can get for you?" Anakin's hostess said as she returned with the towels which she set on the end of the bed.

"Well, I'm wondering if there's a place in town I can buy some new clothes," he said. "I've got some money, but this is all I have."

Frann looked at his dark clothes with an appraising eye. "Those colors are very unwise in this heat," she told him. 'There's a shop in town,' she told him. "I'm sure the girls won't mind

helping you pick out some things,” she added with a smile.

Anakin smiled. “Great,” he replied. “Thanks again.”

“Stop thanking me,” she said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Goodnight, Sky. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight Mrs. Mendosa.”

Once the door was closed, Anakin sat down on the edge of the small bed. He kicked off his boots and pulled off his tunic. Picking up one of the towels and the toothbrush Rana had given him from the small haversack Enna had loaned him, he headed for the fresher. He nearly ran into Mara in the corridor and stopped. “Sorry,” he said. “Were you going in there?”

Mara smiled at him. At nineteen she was far more confident in herself than her younger cousin, and had taken a liking to Anakin from the moment he’d set foot in the door. The fact that Enna had told her about the woman he’d been dreaming about, and that the woman was probably his girlfriend, didn’t faze her at all. “It’s okay,” she said, looking at his bare chest briefly. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks,” Anakin replied, sensing the young woman’s feelings of attraction to him. This was not a complication he had foreseen, and certainly one he didn’t want. *I have to get out of here and soon*, he reflected as he washed up.

Returning to his room, Anakin undressed and fell into bed. It wasn’t long before he fell into a deep sleep, and into a rather provocative dream.

She smiled. “Well I hope you consider me your friend,” she replied.

Anakin looked at her. “Well, I suppose,” he replied. “Though the feelings I have for you aren’t exactly... platonic,” he told her with a smile.

She laughed. “No, I noticed that,” she replied as he began to nuzzle her neck. “You do remember that my parents are in the room across the hall,” she told him.

“So?”

“So we can’t...” she stopped as his hands moved down to her nightie. “We can’t do this,” she said, not sounding terribly convincing.

“Why not?” he asked. “We did it in my mother’s house,” he reminded her.

“Yes, but she wasn’t asleep in the room across the hall,” she countered.

Anakin looked at her with a smile. “You’re afraid you won’t be able to be quiet, is that it?” he teased.

“I can so be quiet,” she countered.

“Then what’s the problem?” he asked, moving to nuzzle her neck again.

She laughed again, and simply decided to let him have his way.

Moving his hands under the thin fabric of her nightie, his hands found her silken skin. “Take this thing off,” he told her. “I don’t know why you bother with them anyway,” he added as she pulled it over her head.

“If you had your way I’d be naked all the time,” she countered.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he replied with a grin. “So you think you can be quiet, do you?” he asked.

She nodded the desire clear in her large dark eyes.

“We’ll see,” he said with a smile as he bent to her body...

Coruscant

Padmé woke up with a start, her body bathed in sweat. She had dreamed of the last night she’d shared with her husband, on Naboo. The desire she felt for him coursed through her as she closed her eyes, the images of the dream still fresh in her mind. She sat up in her bed, their bed, and covered her face with trembling hands. *I miss you so much!* She thought, hoping that, somehow, he would hear her wherever he was. *Where are you, Ani? I need you...*

Tatooine

Anakin’s eyes snapped open. He’d had another dream, but the intensity of this one was far greater than any he’d had before. He awoke aroused and frustrated. Anakin sat up and ran his hands into his sweaty hair, fighting the fierce desire that surged through him. And then he heard something, not with his ears but with his mind. He heard a plea from light years away, and he knew at once who it was. “Padmé,” he said aloud.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46

Tatooine

“Did you sleep well?” Frann asked Anakin the next morning.

“Yes,” he replied. “I dreamed about my wife again,” he told her with a smile.

“Oh?” Frann asked, noting the look of dismay on her daughter’s face. “Must have been a pleasant dream,” she commented as she set a plate down in front of him.

Anakin’s smile grew. “Yes, very much so,” he replied.

“What happened?” Enna asked.

Anakin looked at the child, and then at Frann, who merely smiled, knowing exactly what he had dreamed about. “Well... we were... happy,” he told her. “Having fun together,” he added.

Mara rolled her eyes, old enough to know what he wasn’t saying.

“Sky needs some new clothes, girls,” Frann told them as Jonn joined them at the table. “I thought you could take him to buy some this morning before he starts work,” she added.

“If that’s okay with you,” Anakin asked, looking at Jonn.

“Sure thing,” Jonn replied. “If you’re anything like me, Sky, it will be a short trip. I hate shopping.”

Anakin laughed. “I don’t imagine I like it much myself,” he replied. “But unfortunately I need some new clothes.”

“We’ll find some cool clothes for you, Sky,” Enna assured him. “No problem.”

Coruscant

Padmé was tired as she made her way to the large Senate arena. The vivid dream she’d had the previous night had left her agitated for the rest of the night, and unable to sleep.

“Good morning Padmé,” Bail Organa said as he stepped into the lift with her. He couldn’t help but notice how stressed she seemed and how tired she looked. “Any word on Vader?” he asked.

Padmé shook her head. “No,” she replied. “The bounty hunters have told me where he isn’t, but so far not where he is.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he replied. “You know the man, Padmé, better than anyone. Where would he be? Where do you think he’d go?”

"I thought he'd go to Tatooine," she told him. "To his mother. But I've been there, and she hasn't seen or heard from him."

Organa nodded. "Well don't give up hope, Padmé," he replied, not knowing what else to say. "He's bound to find his way back home."

Padmé didn't reply, knowing that he was simply saying what she wanted to hear. The lift stopped and they stepped off together and proceeded to the Senate meeting.

The arena was already full of senators who had come today for a very important purpose; to elect a new chancellor. At one time Padmé would have jumped at the chance to hold the position; but her life had changed irrevocably since then. Her family was her first priority, and having a family would not afford her the time necessary to fill the position.

After a few moments, the new chairman, who had taken the position that had been vacated by the death of Mas Amedda, called the session to order.

"Honorable members," the chairman began. "We have come today with a very express purpose. It is time to elect a new chancellor. Do I hear any nominations?"

Several nominations were put forth for Bail Organa, many for Mon Mothma, and a great number for Padmé. Due to the number of nominees, it was necessary to hold a vote.

"I don't want to be the chancellor," Padmé told the other two nominees as they sat in a nearby conference room while the vote was taken. "I ought to withdraw my name."

Mon Mothma and Bail looked at one another in surprise.

"Why not, Padmé?" Mothma asked. "I would think you'd welcome the opportunity."

"At one time I would have," Padmé admitted. "But now... my life is so different now, Mon. Being chancellor would just be too much for me to handle right now."

"You're referring to your husband's status," Organa said.

"Yes, that and other factors," she replied. 'We want a family,' she added. "That is what I want more than anything," she continued.

Mon Mothma smiled. "That's understandable," she replied.

"Excuse me, Senators," a droid said as it entered the room. "The voting is complete."

The three candidates looked at one another, and then stood up to follow the droid back to the arena.

Tatooine

After spending an hour letting two teenage girls choose clothes for him, Anakin was only too happy to return to the junk shop to get to work.

"So? How did it go?" Jonn asked, looking up from the piece of machinery he was cleaning.

"As well as can be expected," Anakin replied, causing Jonn to laugh.

“You’re the most exciting thing that’s happened in those girls lives in ages,” he said with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “Now that’s a sad statement,” he quipped. “What do you have there?” he asked, looking at the machinery with interest.

“Pod racer engine,” Jonn replied. ‘A good mate of mine has a pod racer he’s trying to restore. He’s not having much luck, I’m afraid.’ He stopped as an idea struck him. “Maybe you could have a look,” he said.

“I’d be happy to,” Anakin replied. Jonn set the engine down on the work table so Anakin could get a better look at it.

“I’m going to take some more of that garbage out back to the incinerator,” he told Anakin. “I’ll be back soon.”

Anakin merely nodded in response, for he was already engrossed in the engine. It seemed familiar to him somehow, as though he had done this before. *Maybe I have*, he thought as he isolated the problem quickly. The more he thought of it, the more he was starting to believe that he had once lived here on Tatooine. *So why did I crash here? Was I returning home? Do I live here somewhere? That means my wife must be here...* He frowned, deciding that wasn’t likely. *If she were here, she’d have found me by now, he thought. If only I knew where I lived... if only I knew where I belonged...*

“Hello? You here, Jonn?”

Anakin looked up to see a middle aged man entering the shop. “He’s not here right now,” he told him. “Can I help you?”

“I was just coming to see if he’d had a chance to take a look at that engine I...” he stopped as he watched Anakin affect repairs to the engine. ‘That’s it,’ he said, amazed by how quickly he worked. “You really know what you’re doing,” he said. “You must be the young man Jonn’s brother took in.”

Anakin nodded. “Yes I am,” he said. “This is yours?” he asked, glancing up at the man briefly.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I got a great deal on the podracer, but it’s in need of some work, as you can see,” he said.

“This isn’t too bad,” Anakin told him. ‘Most of the problem was sand build up in the chamber,’ he said. “I’ll have it fixed for you in no time,” he added.

“Yeah, I see that,” he replied. ‘Say,’ he said as an idea struck him. “Would you have a look at the rest of it? I have a feeling that you’d be able to get that thing up and running in no time.”

“Sure,” Anakin replied. “Do you plan on racing it soon?”

The man laughed. “Me? Hell no,” he replied. “No human being I know has ever raced in a pod race. Well, except for that slave boy who did years ago,” he added.

Anakin looked up at him. “Really?” he asked. “A human boy raced in a pod race?”

The man nodded. "Several times as I recall," he said. "He disappeared; guess he got sold off world. Hell of a pilot, though. Best I've ever seen."

"Interesting," Anakin replied, returning to his task. "So if you're not racing, then who is?" he asked.

"Well, that remains to be seen," the man admitted. "Why, you interested?"

Anakin shrugged. "I might be," he said. "What's the prize money?"

"Two thousand," the man replied.

Anakin looked up at him with lifted brows. "Really? That's a lot of money!"

"Of course the driver has to share it with me, since I own the racer," the man pointed out.

"Of course," Anakin replied. "Still..."

The man smiled. "Name's Cedler Sanles," he said, extending a hand to Anakin.

Anakin shook his hand. "I don't remember my name," he told him. "The Mendosas call me Sky."

"Good to meet you, Sky," Cedler said. "How long you figure before you have this thing fixed?"

"Fifteen minutes or so," Anakin replied, working diligently. "You want to wait for it?"

"Yeah," he replied. "And if Jonn gets back, I want you to come and have a look at my pod racer. I'll even pay you extra."

This got Anakin's attention and he looked up. "I'll do it," he said, and then returned his concentration to the engine before him.

Coruscant

"It was a tight race, but the majority of votes go to Senator Amidala of Naboo," the chairman announced. A loud round of applause followed, as the senators voiced their approval. Padmé sat with Bail and Mon Mothma, who looked at her with knowing smiles on their faces.

"Well? Still sure you don't want this?" Organa asked.

"Yes, quite sure," Padmé replied, standing up. She waited for the crowd to quiet down before speaking. 'Fellow senators, I am honored that you have chosen me as chancellor,' she began. "However, for personal reasons, I will have to decline."

The senators were stunned for a moment, and then voiced their disappointment. The chairman looked at Padmé, waiting for the crowd to quiet down again before he spoke to her. "Are you certain about this, Senator?" he asked her.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, very sure," she said. 'I suggest that my esteemed colleagues here,' she added, indicating Mon Mothma and Organa, "hold the position together."

"That has never been done in the history of the Republic," the chairman responded.

"No, but change is a good thing sometimes, Chairman," she replied.

He nodded. “Does anyone second this motion?” he asked.

Several senators voiced their agreement, and soon it became apparent that Padmé’s idea was met with universal approval.

“Very well,” the chairman stated. “Then let it be recorded that on this day Senators Bail Organa of Alderaan and Mon Mothma of Chandrilla be declared as co-chancellors.”

Applause filled the arena, as Padmé turned to her friends.

“Congratulations,” she told them with a smile. “The Republic is in very good hands.”

Mon Mothma gave Padmé a hug. “You sneaky thing you,” she said in her ear. “You had this planned all along, didn’t you?”

Padmé laughed. “No, I didn’t know that I would win,” she said. “But I took the chance that I would.” She stopped as a wave of nausea suddenly washed over her. Mothma noticed how her face grew pale and took her hand.

“Are you alright?” she asked with concern.

Padmé shook her head. “I need to get out of here, now,” she said.

Mothma looked over at Organa, who was already directing the pod towards one of the exits as the applause in the arena continued all around them.

Chapter 47

Chapter 47

Anakin headed directly over to the home of Cedler Sanles once he had finished his duties at the junk shop. Cedler lived in a small house on the outskirts of town with his wife, Mari.

“Thanks for coming, Sky,” Cedler said as he lead Anakin around to the large yard at the back of the property. “The racer’s right over here.”

Anakin watched as the man removed a large tarp to reveal the pod racer. He stepped over to take a closer look, the racer giving him a strange feeling of familiarity.

The craft was comprised of a small cockpit pulled by two high-powered engines. The engines were locked to each other via an energy binder, and durable control cables connected the engines to the cockpit. However, the craft had obviously seen better days. Anakin looked at the racer with a critical eye, trying to determine just how much work it would need to be usable again.

“Well? What do you think?” Cedler asked.

“Any idea how old this thing is?” Anakin asked, continuing his inspection.

“The fellow I bought it from wasn’t the original owner,” he replied. “So I don’t really know. I’d say at least ten years.”

Anakin nodded. “At least,” he agreed. He folded his arms over his chest, looking at the racer, getting the distinct feeling that he’d seen it before. “It will take some work, but I think can get it working again,” he said at last.

Cedler smiled. “Great,” he replied. ‘Come on in the house,’ he said. “You’ll stay for supper, won’t you?”

“I’ll never say no to a meal,” Anakin replied with a smile.

Cedler laughed, and clapped Anakin on the shoulder. “Come on then,” he said.

The holovision was playing in the next room as Anakin entered the dining area. The two men entered the living room to see what she was watching.

“I hope you don’t mind me keeping this on,” Mari apologized after Cedler introduced her to Anakin. “I’ve been following an interesting story coming from the capital.”

“Let me guess,” Cedler said as he sat down. “More restrictions on the trade routes.”

Mari shook her head. “No, nothing like that,” she replied. ‘The Chancellor is dead,’ she told them. “He was assassinated.”

“What?!” Cedler exclaimed. “By whom? When did this happen?”

“About a week back,” she told them. “You know how long it takes us to get the news out here.”

“Do they know who’s responsible?” Anakin asked as he watched the footage.

“They were just getting to that,” Mari explained. “Apparently the man responsible has gone missing, but is being hailed as a hero.”

“A hero?” Cedler said. “Since when is assassination heroic?”

“The Jedi Council has revealed that the chancellor was some sort of dark lord,” she said. “I don’t know exactly what that means, but apparently he planned to kill the Jedi and take over the Republic.”

“Wow,” Anakin said, “did they say who it is that killed him?” He stopped as an image of his own face appeared on the screen. All three listened in silence to the announcer.

This is the man the Jedi are hailing as a hero, Darth Vader, aka Anakin Skywalker, who was the protégé of the late chancellor....

“That’s you!” Mari cried, looking at Anakin. Cedler looked at him too in amazement.

“You’re Darth Vader?” he asked.

Anakin had not taken his eyes from the footage, which had now switched to the election of the new chancellor. “I...I guess I am,” he stammered. He frowned. “Darth Vader? That’s my name?? Or is it Anakin Skywalker?”

“I guess that’s where Sky came from,” Cedler suggested.

Anakin watched as the coverage of the new chancellor was reported upon.

“Although winning by a clear majority, Senator Amidala of Naboo has declined the position, nominating Senators Mon Mothma of Chandrilla and Bail Organa to the position. The Senate approved her nomination, and for the first time in Republican history, there will be two chancellors...”

“That’s her!” Anakin cried when he saw the image of Senator Amidala on the screen. “That’s Padmé!”

“Padmé?” Mari said.

Anakin nodded, his eyes never leaving her image. “My wife,” he told her with a smile.

“That’s your wife?” Mari said, looking at the image on the screen. “She’s beautiful!”

Anakin wasn’t listening, however, for he was mesmerized by the image of his wife. “Do you know what this means?” he asked, his eyes not leaving the image.

Mari and Cedler looked at him.

“I know where I belong,” Anakin said. “I can go home.”

After a hearty meal, Anakin left the Sanles home and started the walk back to the apartment complex in the downtown area. It was cooler now that the suns had begun their descent, but Anakin didn’t notice. Nor was he thinking about the rather generous advance payment that Cedler had insisted he take upon his departure. His mind was so full of all that he had learned from the news that he couldn’t stop thinking about it.

I killed the chancellor... a monster who had designs on the Republic... but I was his protégé...what does that say about me? He frowned, realizing that his life was far more complicated than he'd realized. Protégé of the chancellor, married to a senator, and now hero and savior of the Republic. Darth Vader... *that name doesn't mean anything to me...*

Anakin stopped as he noticed a rather disturbing scene unfolding across the street, where a young boy was being man handled and berated by a very aggressive and rather large alien. Anakin frowned, and moved over at once.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked the creature. It looked up at him and said something in an alien tongue, which, to his surprise, Anakin understood. And what he understood made him angry.

"You might want to...rephrase that," Anakin said in the alien's language, taking a threatening step towards him. The alien was suitably intimidated, and took a step back.

"This doesn't concern you, Human," it said. "This is my property; I'm merely punishing it for being lazy."

Anakin looked down at the boy, who couldn't have been more than six years old. "This is a human being," Anakin said. "Not a piece of property."

"It's a slave," the alien retorted, "and I own it. That means I can do what I want with it."

The alien's words angered Anakin even more, for they reverberated within him on a personal level for some reason. And then he had an idea.

"How much do you figure he's worth?" he asked the alien.

"Not much," the alien grumbled, giving the boy a dirty look.

"I'll tell you what," Anakin said, taking out the money that Cedler had given him. "I'll give you....fifty for him."

The alien looked at the money in Anakin's hand. "Not enough," he said. "I want a hundred."

Anakin looked up at him. "You just told me he wasn't worth much," he retorted.

"Yeah, well, business is business," the alien replied.

Anakin narrowed his eyes and stared hard at the creature. "Fifty will do," he said. "In fact, it's too much. You'll take thirty-five."

"I'll take thirty-five," the alien said, unaware that his mind had just been manipulated.

Anakin counted out the money and handed it to the alien. "Now if I hear of you harming this boy again, you'll have me to answer to," he said threateningly.

The alien nodded, looked down at the money and then sprinted away. Anakin turned to the boy, who had been watching the exchange with silent astonishment. Anakin squatted down before the boy to look into his face.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Jakob, sir," the boy replied quietly.

“Well, Jakob, you’re free,” Anakin told him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

The boy nodded, unable to truly comprehend just what that meant.

“Where do you live?” Anakin asked him.

“In the slave quarters,” Jakob replied.

“Show me,” Anakin said, standing up and holding a hand out to the boy.

Jakob hesitated, but only for a moment, and then put his small hand in the large hand of his rescuer. And then the two walked down the road in the direction of the slave quarters.

The mother of the young boy was pacing anxiously in the small apartment when Anakin arrived with the child in tow. She looked at Anakin with suspicion, but not before giving her son an enormous hug. “I’ve been so worried!” she told him. “Where have you been?”

“Charra was angry with me,” Jakob told her. “He was...” he stopped as he remembered the beating and frowned.

“The creature was abusing your son,” Anakin told her. She looked up at him.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Why are you here?”

“He helped me, Mom,” Jakob told her. “He bought me from Charra!”

The woman looked up at Anakin in surprise. “You did that?” she asked. Anakin nodded. “Why? Why would you do such a thing? You can purchase a slave anywhere, why...”

“I don’t want a slave,” Anakin interjected.

She frowned. “I’m afraid I don’t understand,” she said.

“I bought the boy’s freedom, not his servitude,” Anakin explained. “He’s free now, Madam. He’s no longer a slave.”

The woman’s eyes widened in shock, and she was unable to speak for a moment. “I... I don’t know what to say,” she said at last. “I don’t know how to respond to such kindness. I’ve never been shown such kindness in my life,” she added, her eyes filling with tears.

A flood of memories flashed through Anakin’s mind as he watched the young woman with her son. He looked around the small abode, which was humbly furnished. Somehow this place, this situation seemed familiar; more than that, it seemed personal. More and more he was beginning to put together the pieces of his memory to form a picture of his life, of his past. He was almost certain now that Tatooine had once been his home, and as he watched the young slave boy with his mother, he began to wonder if he too had been a slave as a child. Was this the reason he had reacted to it so strongly? Was this why the very thought of slavery made his blood boil with righteous indignation?

“Can you buy my mom too, Mister?” Jakob asked after summoning his nerve.

His mother was mortified. “Jakob!” she admonished. “You have no right to ask such a thing!”

“You’re a slave too?” Anakin asked her.

The woman nodded. "Yes, we are, that is, we were owned by the same person."

"That miserable creature I saw earlier," Anakin remarked.

"Yes, Charra," she said. 'He's owned me since shortly after I gave birth to Jakob here,' she said, stroking her son's dark mop of hair. "Almost seven years now."

"Where is the boy's father?" Anakin asked.

The woman shrugged. "He left when I found out I was pregnant," she told him. "He's never as much as laid eyes on his son."

Anakin frowned. "That's disgusting," he said. He frowned as he wondered if he was a father, wondered if he had children back on Coruscant who were missing their father, children whose names he didn't even know. 'Here,' he said to the woman, pulling out what was left of his money. "Take this. Use it to buy your freedom."

"Oh, no," she said. "I couldn't do that," she said, pushing the money away.

"Why not?" he asked. "Your son is free, you should be too. You can start a new life, a better life for both of you. Please take it, I insist."

The woman looked down at her son, who watched the exchange with eyes full of hope. What mother could turn down a chance to give her child a better life? It was all she'd ever wanted, and this man, this kind stranger was handing her the means to do so.

"How can I ever thank you for this?" she asked softly, taking the money from him, a stray tear rolling down his face.

"You don't need to," Anakin said, relieved that he'd managed to talk her into it. 'I'd better get going,' he said, turning to leave. "It's getting dark outside."

"Wait," the woman called as Anakin headed for the door. "I don't even know your name!"

Anakin stopped and turned back to her, happy that he now had a name to give her. "Anakin," he told her. "Anakin Skywalker." And with that, he turned and left the apartment.

It was dark by the time Anakin arrived at the Mendosa home, and he found Jonn up and flipping through the stations on the holonet.

"How did it go?" he asked Anakin.

"Not bad," Anakin replied, sitting down. "The racer's pretty old, but I think I can get it working."

Jonn nodded. "Did you happen to see the news earlier?" he asked.

"I did," Anakin replied. "It seems I'm something of a celebrity," he added wryly.

"More like a hero," Jonn said. 'You know I never did like that bastard, Palpatine,' he added. "He always seemed just a little too... benevolent."

Anakin laughed. "Well, I can't say I remember him or what I did," he told him. "But I guess I must have had my reasons."

"No doubt," Jonn said with a yawn. 'Well, I guess it's bedtime for me,' he said, standing up. "You want to watch this?"

"No," Anakin replied, standing as well, "I'm beat."

"Well goodnight then, Sky," he said. 'Wait... they said your name,' he remembered. "But they said two names. Which one is it?"

"The name Darth Vader means nothing to me," Anakin told him. "Anakin Skywalker is my real name, I'm certain of it."

Jonn nodded. "Good enough," he said. "Goodnight then, Anakin," he added with a smile.

"Good night," Anakin replied, returning his smile.

Coruscant

"This was a wonderful idea," Padmé said as she and Dormé sat in a quiet restaurant. "And just what I needed."

Dormé smiled. "Well I know how much you hate cooking," she remarked. "And I just wasn't up to it tonight. Besides, I thought you needed a break."

Padmé nodded. "Yes, most definitely," she replied. "I still can't believe the senate wanted me to be the chancellor," she said, thinking back to the meeting earlier that day.

"I can," Dormé replied. "You're very well respected, intelligent, influential... everything a chancellor ought to be."

Padmé smiled. "Thanks," she said. "But I still don't want the job."

Dormé laughed. She took a sip of her wine as she formulated a question. "Tell me something," she asked, "would you have taken it if you weren't expecting?" she asked.

Padmé sighed as she considered this. "I honestly don't know," she replied. "Right now my mind is so preoccupied with finding Anakin that I can't even wrap my mind around that question."

"I understand," Dormé said.

"More wine?" the serving droid asked Dormé.

"No, thank you," Dormé replied.

"Can we just have the bill please?" Padmé asked.

"Right away," the droid replied.

"You look tired," Dormé commented. "You're still not sleeping well, are you?"

Padmé shook her head. "Not well at all," she replied. "I'm so used to that big warm body next to me," she said wistfully. She stopped as her emotions threatened to get the better of her.

Dormé felt terribly, wishing there was something she could say to alleviate Padmé's stress. But until Anakin was back home, there was little anyone could say or do to do that. All she could do was support her friend as best she could.

Dormé and Padmé had almost reached the speeder when seemingly out of no where a small group of reporters appeared, holo-recorders at the ready.

“Senator Amidala! Was your decision to decline the position of chancellor due to the disappearance of your husband?”

“Senator Amidala, there are rumors that you have hired bounty hunters to find your husband?”

“Have you considered the possibility that Darth Vader might be dead?”

It was all Padmé could do not to lash out at the reporters, but she kept her cool and simply ignored them. Dormé, however, was not as patient, and turned to them angrily.

“Get away from her, you parasites!” she cried. “Haven’t you any respect for a person’s privacy?”

The reporters were unfazed by her comment and simply continued to take holovideo of Padmé as she made her way to the speeder. It wasn’t until they were airborne that they dispersed and returned to their respective news agencies.

“Are you alright?” Dormé asked as she turned to Padmé.

Padmé nodded, her grip on the steering mechanism tightening. She was silent for a few moments, and then finally said what was on her mind. “What if they’re right?” she asked. “What if he’s dead, Dormé? What if he never comes home?”

Dormé frowned, and reached out and put her hand on Padmé’s shoulder. “He’s not,” she averred. “Don’t even think it!”

Padmé did her best not to, but as each day without word or sign of him passed, the greater the possibility became in her mind. And the thought of going on without him, of raising his children without him left her feeling emptier than she’d ever imagined possible. Hot tears spilled out of her eyes, making her vision blur, and she blinked them away.

“Pull over, Padmé,” Dormé said.

“I’m okay,” she protested.

“No you’re not,” Dormé replied. “Now pull over before you crash.”

Padmé finally relented and pulled the craft over. She looked at Dormé who simply held her arms open to her. Padmé accepted her friend’s embrace, and gave in finally to the tears that she’d been fighting for days.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48

Tatooine

The small room had no windows, a low ceiling and nothing to sit on save a hard bench that ran along one wall. Anakin had no idea how long he'd been in there, for he'd lost the ability to keep track of time. Pain had a way of doing that, pain and hunger. He had tried to determine why he was being punished this time, but, as usual, his master was not forthcoming. Sometimes he was simply punished for punishment's sake, as a means of augmenting the already healthy anger he felt most of the time. Coupled with that was the hatred that he now bore his master who he had spent the past eight years with. Eight long years of loneliness and deprivation, of learning lessons the first time or else suffering dire consequences. Anakin had stopped feeling anything that wasn't dark had stopped thinking of himself as a person and thought only of himself as the slave that he was....

..... "Don't patronize me, Vader," Palpatine snapped, his façade of benevolence falling to the way side. "I know you and she have been sexually involved for quite some time now. You deliberately disobeyed me, Vader. You just couldn't keep control of your carnal urges, could you?"

"I love Senator Amidala," he declared. "Something you'd know nothing about."

"Love?" Palpatine laughed. 'Since when does a Sith know anything about love? And make no mistake, Vader,' he warned. "You are a Sith. Don't think that because you've given in to the pleasure of the flesh that makes you anything less than one."

Anakin could feel his entire body tensing up as he fought against the rage that was mounting rapidly within him. Palpatine sensed it and it pleased him.

"And yet," he continued, 'perhaps it's a good thing. Perhaps impregnating the senator would be a good plan,' he added. "The fruits of such a union would be most useful," he concluded with an evil smile.

"You will not take my children from me!" Anakin roared, too incensed to realize what he was saying.

Palpatine narrowed his eyes, pleased that Anakin had fallen into the trap. "Such insolence," he snapped. "You seem to forget whom you are talking to, Lord Vader!" he said, lifting his hands to send a bolt of Sith lightning across the room....

Mara was just leaving the fresher when she heard shouting come from the room where Anakin was sleeping. She walked over to the door and put an ear to the door. It was clear that Anakin was in the throes of a nightmare, for he was shouting in a tone of clear agitation. She hesitated for a moment, not sure she ought to intervene. But his voice was only growing louder, and so she decided she had no choice.

Opening the door and allowing the hall light into the room, Mara looked over at the small bed where Anakin was tossing and turning violently. She ran to the bed and sat on the edge of it. Reaching over to him she took him by the shoulders and gave him a shake. "Wake up, Sky!" she said as she shook him.

Anakin stopped thrashing about, but he did not fully wake up. "Padmé?" he mumbled in confusion. "Is that you??"

Mara frowned, confused by the name for a moment. And then she remembered: *Padmé is his wife...*

"You're having a bad dream," she told him, neither affirming or denying his question. "You were shouting in your sleep."

"Padmé, I've missed you so much," he murmured, taking her hands from his shoulders. And then he sensed the truth, and his eyes opened. When he saw Mara sitting on the side of his bed, he sat up at once. "What are you doing?" he demanded. "Why are you in here?"

"You... you were shouting in your sleep," she stammered. "I was just trying to wake you up."

Anakin stared at her, sensing that there was more to her statement than she was saying. "Why didn't you tell me you weren't Padmé?" he demanded.

"I... you didn't give me a chance," she said, standing up. "I was about to, but... then you woke up and..."

"Please leave, Mara," he said. "This is very inappropriate and you know it."

Mara frowned, and then ran out of the room, humiliated.

Anakin got out of bed and closed the door, and, after a moment's thought, locked it as well. He then returned to bed, hoping to catch a few hours of sleep before he had to get up for work.

Coruscant

"Here you are," Dormé said as she handed Padmé a steaming cup of tea. "It's chamomile, it will help you relax."

"Thank you," Padmé said as she accepted the cup. She set the cup down on the table before her and watched the steam spiral upward for a moment. The incident with the reporters had left her terribly rattled, and Dormé was beginning to worry. She watched her friend, trying to decide if she ought to say what was on her mind.

"Padmé, I'm worried about you," she said at last.

Padmé looked up at her, but said nothing.

"I'm worried about what all this stress is doing to you," Dormé continued. "And to those babies you're carrying."

Padmé lowered her eyes once more. "What do you suggest?" she asked quietly. "That I not worry about Anakin? That I simply forget that he's been missing for a week?"

"No, of course not!" Dormé replied. "I'm simply suggesting that you do something to help you deal with the stress."

"What can I do?" Padmé asked in frustration. "I can't turn on the holonet that they're not talking about him. I hear his name in the Senate, and now the media is hounding me! There's no escape from it, Dormé!"

"Yes there is," Dormé replied calmly, moving over to sit beside Padmé. She put an arm around Padmé's waist. "Naboo. I think you should go to Naboo and stay with your family until Anakin returns."

Padmé looked up at her as she considered this. "But... I have to be here," she said.

"Why?" Dormé asked. "Do you think being here will change Anakin's situation at all?"

Padmé frowned. "No," she admitted.

"Then for your own sanity, for the sake of those wee babies, go to Naboo, Milady," Dormé assisted. "You know it's the best thing to do, and you know that Anakin will find you no matter where you are when he makes his way back home."

Padmé nodded. "He told me once he'd go to the ends of the universe to find me," she said softly as tears filled her eyes.

Dormé smiled. "That is the most romantic thing I've ever heard," she said.

Padmé smiled. "I know," she said. She took a deep breath to steady herself and prevent another crying jag. 'Okay,' she said at last. "I'll do it."

"Wonderful," Dormé said with a smile. "I'll let Captain Typho to ready the ship for departure first thing in the morning."

Padmé shook her head. "No, I want to go tonight," she said, suddenly feeling very homesick. "I want to go home, Dormé."

Dormé nodded and stood up. "Leave it to me, Padmé," she said. "I'll make the arrangements right now."

Tatooine

Anakin was moody as he began his day at the junk shop. Unsettling dreams had disturbed his sleep, leaving him tired and irritable. Jonn noticed this as he watched Anakin work on putting together a droid that had been brought in in pieces. He wanted to say something to the young man, but wasn't quite sure how to begin. Jonn had never been a man of many words, and had judged Anakin to be the same. But there was clearly something bothering him, and Jonn felt as though he ought to be the one to talk to him about it.

"Something wrong, Anakin?" he asked at last.

Anakin looked up briefly from his task. "No," he said simply, not wanting to tell the man what his teenage daughter had pulled the previous night. And as for the dreams... Anakin didn't even know where to begin.

"Didn't sleep well?" Jonn pressed, busying himself with his own work.

“Not really, no,” Anakin replied. “I had nightmares.”

“Oh? What about?”

Anakin frowned. “I’m not quite sure,” he admitted. “But they were disturbing, frightening even. I think they were about the man that I supposedly killed.”

Jonnn nodded. “Your memory is coming back,” he stated. “Slowly but surely, you’re starting to remember your past.”

“I think so too,” Anakin replied, looking up at him again. He remembered back to the previous evening, about the encounter he’d had with the young slave boy and his mother. “I think I may have been a slave when I was a child,” he said at last.

Jonnn looked at him in surprise. “Oh? What makes you think so?”

Anakin related the incident from the previous night, about how he’d felt a strong feeling of familiarity around the young woman and her son. Jonnn listened, more than a little surprised by the fact that Anakin had given his days’ wages to buy the freedom of the pair.

“You’re never going to be able to afford passage if you keep giving away your money, boy,” Jonnn said at last with a smile.

“I know,” he said. “I couldn’t help it. That sleemo was beating that poor boy, Jonnn! How could I not help him?”

Jonnn sighed. “You couldn’t,” he said. “You’re a good man, Anakin, a man of conscience. I don’t think many would do what you did, particularly given your circumstances.”

Anakin shrugged, and returned to his task. “I guess I know where I belong now,” he said. “I just wonder how much passage home will be.”

“We can find out if you want,” Jonnn suggested. ‘Coruscant is pretty far,’ he added. “It’s bound to be pretty steep.”

“Coruscant,” Anakin said, letting the name bounce around in his mind for a moment. “That’s where my wife is,” he said at last. “That’s where I need to go.”

Jonnn nodded. “There’s a space station here in town,” he said. “We can go over and find out later on if you want.”

“I would,” Anakin replied. “Though I have a feeling it’s going to depress the hell out of me when I find out how much it costs,” he added.

Jonnn smiled. “If your wife is a senator, she’s probably got people in every sector looking for you. Maybe you won’t need to go to her; maybe she’ll come to you.”

Anakin hadn’t considered this, but it did make sense. If Padmé had been elected as Chancellor of the Republic, she was obviously an influential and well connected person. He had to wonder why she’d turned down the chance to be the chancellor. She’d cited personal reasons; was his disappearance the reason? And then he thought of something.

“Maybe I could contact her,” he said, starting to grow excited as the idea took form. “Now that I know where she is, now that I know her name... couldn’t I contact her?”

Jonnn nodded as a smile formed on his face. “Yes, of course you could,” he replied. “Why didn’t we think of this sooner?”

“Because I didn’t know who or where she was,” Anakin reminded him.

“Ah yes,” Jonnn replied. “But now that you do...”

“Now I can tell her where I am,” he said. “And she can come here.”

Jonnn nodded. “There’s a communication station beside the space port,” he told Anakin. “That’s about the only place you’ll be able to send a message to the core.”

“Okay,” Anakin said. “I suppose that will cost money too, won’t it?” he asked.

“You’ve got it,” Jonnn replied. ‘I owe you a couple of days’ pay now,’ he said. “Just so long as you don’t go spending it freeing more slaves,” he added with a smile.

Anakin smiled. “Well, I’ll try to restrain myself,” he replied. “Thank, Jonnn. Once again I’m in your debt.”

Naboo

Jobal and Ruwee were just finishing lunch when they heard the door at the back of the house open. The looked at one another and then over to the doorway where Dormé and Padmé had appeared.

“Padmé!” Jobal said, standing up at once. “What are you doing here?” she asked as Ruwee pulled out a chair for each of the women.

“I just needed to get away from the capital,” Padmé said. “I’m tired of the media hounding me at every turn.”

Ruwee and Jobal exchanged a look. “Still no word from Anakin, then?” Ruwee asked.

Padmé shook her head sadly. “No, nothing,” she said.

“We saw you on the news,” Jobal said, deciding to change the subject. “I was surprised that you turned down the chance to be Chancellor,” she commented.

Padmé looked at Dormé, wondering if she ought to tell her parents the real reason behind her decision. “I... there’s just too much going on in my life right now, Mom,” she said. “I wouldn’t be able to devote myself to the position in the capacity necessary.”

“Because of Anakin’s disappearance,” Ruwee stated.

“Yes,” Padmé agreed. ‘But... there’s more going on in my life than you know,’ she told her parents. “I’m carrying Anakin’s twins,” she told them.

Her words could not have been more surprising to Ruwee and Jobal, and they both expressed their happiness with hugs and expressions of happiness.

“Does Anakin know about them?” Jobal asked.

“Yes,” Padmé told her mother. “I found out shortly before he left for Coruscant.”

“You mean while you were here?” Ruwee asked.

“Yes,” Padmé said. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t say anything,’ she added. “I just wanted to keep it quiet for the first little while. But since Anakin’s disappearance... well, things have changed.”

“Oh you poor dear,” Jobal said, hugging her daughter again. “Going through all this and expecting twins as well! You made the right decision to come home, Padmé. This is where you belong right now.”

“It was Dormé’s idea,” Padmé told her parents, looking at her friend who had been all but forgotten. “She convinced me that this was the best thing to do.”

“Well Dormé always did have her head on her shoulders good and proper,” Ruwee said, smiling at Dormé.

“Yes, thank you Dormé,” Jobal added. “For convincing Padmé that home is where she belongs right now.”

Dormé smiled. “Well, once in a while she listens to me,” she quipped. “I’m just glad she did on this occasion.”

“Yes, so are we,” Jobal replied. “Have you ladies eaten lunch yet? We have plenty left over.”

“We haven’t,” Padmé said. “But I don’t have much of an appetite these days,” she added.

“Oh I remember that feeling,” Jobal said as she stood up. “But I also remember that having food in my stomach, even a little, helped a lot. So eat, Padmé. Even just a wee bit.”

Padmé looked at the plate her mother had set down in front of her. “I’ll try, Mom,” she said.

Jobal smiled and bent to kiss Padmé on the cheek. “That’s all you can do, love,” she said.

Coruscant

It was early morning on Coruscant when Jar Jar Binks entered the office of Senator Amidala. He was surprised that Padmé wasn’t present, for she was always early.

“Senator Padmé?” he called, wandering through the suite. “Issa you here?”

Getting no response to his calls, Jar Jar stopped for a moment, trying to figure out what was going on. He scratched his head, and then thought to check his messages. Sauntering over to his desk, he sat down and activated the computer. Sure enough there was a message from Captain Typho.

Jar Jar, I’m taking the Senator to Naboo for a few days. She has asked me to remind you to forward her messages to her there. She’ll have her comlink with her, or you can send the messages to her parents’ house. I’ll attach the coordinates to this message.

Jar Jar, though not the most intelligent being in the galaxy, was intuitive enough to realize that Padmé was not herself. She needed a break, and Naboo was the perfect place for her to go to get one.

Wandering back into the main office, Jar Jar checked the message screen to see if there was anything new for Padmé. Seeing that there wasn’t, he left the office and returned to his own duties.

Once the door had closed, the screen he'd just checked started to signal an incoming message. Its origin was from the Outer Rim, from the planet Tatooine.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49

Tatooine

"How did it go?" Jonn asked as Anakin emerged from the communication center.

"She wasn't in her office," Anakin replied, the disappointment evident in his voice. "The message just went to her in box."

Jonn nodded. "Well, she'll get it when she returns," he assured Anakin. "And once she does I'm sure she'll be here in no time."

"Let's hope so," Anakin replied as they left the space port. 'In the mean time I think I need to keep trying to make money,' he added. "Just in case."

Jonn frowned. "Just in case what?" he asked. "She doesn't come?"

Anakin shrugged. "Well, I don't know how things were when I left," he said. "Maybe we're estranged, maybe she doesn't want me back."

Jonn frowned. "Don't talk negative, son," he said. "It serves no purpose but to get you down. She *will* come, you'll see."

Anakin walked back to the ship with Jonn, and then the two men parted ways. Jonn went on home, while Anakin headed over to Cedler's house to continue working on the pod racer.

"Looks great, Hon," Jonn said as he sat down to dinner with his wife, daughter and niece.

"Where's Sky?" Enna asked.

"He went to Cedler's house to work on the pod racer," he told her. "Why are you so interested in his whereabouts, young lady?" he asked.

Enna's face reddened. "Well, my dad is coming to pick me up tomorrow," she explained. "And I just wanted to ask Sky if he would still have time to help me fix my swoop bike."

"His name is *Anakin*," Mara stated. "Remember?" Enna rolled her eyes, her cousin's condescending attitude starting to grate on her nerves.

"He's *married*, Mara," Enna countered in the same tone. 'Remember?' "Oh shut your face," Mara snapped.

"Girls! That's quite enough," Frann said sharply. "Honestly, the way the two of you flirt with that young man is simply shocking."

"It's Mara, not me," Enna protested.

"You little liar!" Mara cried. "That is so not true!"

“Enough!” Jonn hollered finally. “You two should be ashamed yourselves! Now be quiet and let me eat my supper in peace!”

The girls gave one another one final dirty look and then lowered their eyes to their meal.

“I took Anakin to Recce Station so he could send his wife a message,” Jonn told his wife. “Now that he knows where and who she is, he was able to send a message to her office at the Senate.”

“Wonderful!” Frann exclaimed. “She must have been so relieved to hear from him.”

“She wasn’t there, unfortunately,” Jonn replied. “So the message was just recorded.”

“Well she’ll see it sooner or later,” Frann replied. “And when she does she’ll send someone to come and bring him home.”

“Or come herself,” Mara piped up. “I know if I were his wife I’d want to be the one to find him.”

“You just want to be his wife,” Enna teased, earning another dirty look from her cousin.

Jonn and Frann merely looked at one another in exasperation.

Elsewhere in town...

“Supper ready?” Cedler asked his wife as he entered the house.

“Almost,” she replied. “Just waiting on the roast. Is Anakin coming in for supper?” she asked as she flipped through the holonet.

Cedler shrugged as he sat down beside his wife. “He’s hell bent on getting that racer fixed,” he told her. “I made the mistake of mentioning that there was a race this weekend, and now he wants to enter it.”

Mari looked at him in surprise. “You’re going to let him?” she asked. “No human has ever competed in those races, Ced, you know that. He wouldn’t stand a chance!”

“There was one human who did race,” he reminded her. “Remember that slave boy?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with Anakin?” she asked.

“I think Anakin is that slave boy,” Cedler replied. “Or at least he was at one time. He’s the right age, Mari, and it fits.”

Mari was surprised to hear his comment. “What do you mean it fits?” she asked.

Cedler was about to reply when he noticed footage of Anakin’s wife on the holonet. “Turn it up,” he told his wife.

Senator Amidala was seen leaving a small eating establishment with a friend earlier tonight, but refused to stop to answer questions. Senator Amidala! Was your decision to decline the position of chancellor due to the disappearance of your husband? Senator Amidala, there are rumors that you have hired bounty hunters to find your husband? Have you considered the possibility that Darth Vader might be dead?

There were reports that the Senator left the electoral proceedings two days ago in a hurry. Rumor has it that she took ill. One has to wonder if her illness has anything to do with the pallid appearance of her lately.

Anakin stood in the doorway watching the news broadcast. He was furious as the reporters shamelessly hounded her, throwing personal, insensitive questions at her retreating form. He could see by the look in her eyes how upset she was. And he saw something else, something not yet visible to the eyes, but more than apparent to the extraordinary perceptions that Anakin was rediscovering more each day. *She's pregnant*, he thought with a great sense of joy and unshakable certainty. *My wife is carrying my child... I'm going to be a father!!*

This just in, the report continued. *Senator Amidala has left the capital for an undisclosed destination shortly after reporters took this footage of her. It is not known if her hasty departure is connected in any way to the disappearance of Darth Vader. We will keep you posted as this story unfolds.*

Cedler noticed Anakin standing in the doorway and turned to him. "Still think she's not coming for you?" he asked.

Anakin looked down at him and smiled. "I guess maybe I was wrong," he admitted.

"Looks like you won't have time to finish fixing that racer," Cedler commented.

"It's already done," Anakin told him. "All you need is a pilot."

Mari and Cedler looked at one another in amazement, each of them a little more convinced that Anakin Skywalker was indeed the legendary pod racer from years ago.

"Come on," Mari said. "Let's eat. I guess this will be our last dinner together," she realized.

Anakin nodded. "Yes, it sure looks that way."

"I hope you'll bring her here to meet us," Mari said.

"Of course," Anakin replied. "I want her to meet everyone who has been so kind and helpful to me," he added as he pulled a chair out for her. He smiled as the realization filled his mind; *I'm going home!*

Naboo

"Padmé, look at this!"

Padmé looked over to where Sola was holding up a tiny pink sleeper. She smiled. "Does it come in blue too?" she asked as she walked over to where her sister stood.

"What makes you think it's a boy?" Sola asked as Padmé looked through the sleepers piled neatly on a display table.

"Anakin says we're having one of each," she replied. "And I have no doubts that he's right."

Sola nodded, not fully understanding her brother-in-law's unusual abilities, but not doubting them for a moment.

Padmé found a blue sleeper the same size as the one Sola was holding and showed her.

"Perfect!" Sola declared with a smile, taking the sleeper from Padmé. 'I'm buying these,' she told her sister. "My first official step in spoiling my niece and nephew," she added.

Padmé laughed as Sola walked away. She turned to look at some maternity apparel when on the other side of the shop she spotted Ella, her former assistant. Ella was quite obviously pregnant, and was looking through the clearance rack. She glanced up briefly, her face registering her shock at seeing Padmé. Before she had a chance to escape, however, Padmé walked over to her.

"Hello Senator," Ella said, forcing herself to smile. "What are you doing in here?"

"The same thing you are," Padmé replied, looking at the prominent little bump that Ella was now sporting. "So I was right about you and Palo. You *are* pregnant."

Ella's face went red. "Well, yes," she replied. "I am. I'm sorry," she said not knowing what else to say.

"Oh please," Padmé replied. "*Please* don't apologize! I'm actually grateful that he cheated on me, for I know that I am far happier with my husband than I ever could have been with Palo."

Ella smiled. "Good for you, Senator," she said. "That's a wonderful attitude to have. After all, what's the sense of pining after someone who..."

"Don't say another word, you sleazy little tart," Padmé snapped, stepping closer to her. "Don't you dare condescend to me! Is that what that snake Palo would have you believe?? That I *lost* him to *you*?"

Ella grew alarmed at Padmé's vehemence. "Well... isn't that what happened? Isn't that the reason you broke up with him?"

"No, it isn't," Padmé retorted. "I broke up with him in order to save his life. And do you know how he repaid me? Did he tell you what he did to me right in my own office?"

Ella could only shake her head.

Padmé was about to tell her when Palo appeared behind Ella. She felt a surge of anger at the sight of him and scowled. "Perhaps he should tell you himself," she suggested finally. 'Go ahead, Palo,' she challenged. "Tell Ella all about what you tried to do to me, what you would have done were it not for my husband."

Ella turned to Palo with a frown. "What is she on about?" she asked.

Palo looked at her, and then at Padmé, and then back at Ella. "It was all a misunderstanding," he stammered. "I was hurting, she'd dumped me for that bastard Vader, and..."

"That's justification for rape, is it Palo?" Padmé interjected.

Ella's eyes widened. "Rape? You *raped* her??"

"No, of course not!" Palo protested.

“Only because you were stopped in time,” Padmé put in, sickened by his lack of honor. “If Anakin hadn’t arrived when he had, you would have.”

Ella shook her head as tears sprang to her eyes. She slapped Palo hard on the face and then ran away. Palo brought a hand to his face and his eyes turned to Padmé. “You’re never going to forgive me over that, are you?” he asked.

Padmé looked at him with open contempt before turning and walking away. But she was prevented from doing so by Palo’s hand upon her arm. She looked up at him and yanked her arm free. “Don’t you ever dare touch me again!” she warned angrily.

“Are you happy, Padmé?” he asked. “Are you happier married to that butcher Vader than you would have been married to me?”

Padmé looked at him for a moment and then, to his utter shock, began to laugh.

“If you only knew how utterly idiotic your question sounded,” she replied. ‘I never knew true happiness until I married Darth Vader,’ she told him. “He loves me to the very depths of my soul, and I him. He makes me feel alive, and completes me in a way that you never did nor ever could.” She relished the look of shock and humiliation on his face for a moment before continuing. “You’d better run after your little tart,” she suggested. “You needn’t worry about her staying angry with you. She has no pride, after all.”

Palo was too angry and mortified to reply, and simply stormed off. Padmé turned and watched him leave; smiling when she thought of how much Anakin would have enjoyed the exchange.

“Padmé? Are you ready to go?”

Padmé looked over to her sister who stood with parcel in hand. “Yes I am,” she said, and proceed out of the shop, Sola following behind her.

Chapter 50

Chapter 50

Chapter 50

Tatooine

Anakin returned to the Mendosa home very late that night, and found that everyone had already gone to sleep. He went about the business of getting ready for bed as quietly as possible, not wishing to awaken anyone in the household, especially Mara.

It was no secret how she felt about him. Anakin would have to be blind not to notice the way she looked at him, the long stares she would give him if she happened to catch him shirtless. The fact that she knew he was married didn't seem to deter her, for her flirting never missed a beat even upon hearing about Padmé from her father. *Are all women like this?* He wondered as he got ready for bed. No, he felt certain that his wife was not.

Although he remembered very little about her, he nonetheless felt as though he knew that what they shared was very special. The dreams he'd had of her, the way he felt upon seeing her on the holonet all made him feel as though he was missing a part of himself by being apart from her.

I'm going to be a father, Anakin thought once more with a smile as he got into bed. While the joy of this realization was tremendous, it came with it a greater sense of urgency to get home than ever before. The last thing she needed was undo stress if she was pregnant, and he being missing was undoubtedly very stressful for her. He could see it in her face as she fled from the reporters, and it was no doubt the reason behind her turning down the position of chancellor. *I'll be home soon, Padmé,* he told her, remembering the message he'd left earlier. *She's on her way here... she'll be here soon,* he thought, wondering if he'd be able to sleep at all from the excitement and anticipation.

Naboo

"Padmé, the fresh air up there will do you a world of good," Sola insisted. "And you know how much you enjoy spending time with the girls."

Padmé looked at her sister, and then her mother who smiled. She knew how persistent Sola could be; both of her girls were nothing if not tenacious. But Jobal also knew how ill Padmé had been feeling lately, and knew that the long boat ride up to the Lake District was not something she could endure in her present condition.

"I would love to come," Padmé said at last. "But I'm just not up to it right now, Sola. The thought of that long boat ride... it's just too far for me right now."

Sola sighed. She remembered all too well how poorly she'd felt in the early stages of her own pregnancies, and could certainly understand her sister's reticence. And yet, she was worried about Padmé, and wanted to do something, anything, to help her out of the funk she was going through.

“Maybe Padmé can join you in a few days,” Jobal suggested at last. “If she’s feeling better,” she added.

Padmé nodded. “Yes, that’s a great idea,” she replied. She looked back at her sister. “You’ll be up there for at least a week, right?”

“Yes,” Sola replied. “How long before you return to the capital?”

“I don’t know,” Padmé replied. ‘I can’t deal with the media right now,’ she admitted. “It’s just too much.”

“Bunch of parasites, that’s what they are,” Jobal commented with a frown. “Imagine hounding you like that with all you’re going through. It’s disgusting!”

“That’s their job, Mom,” Padmé told them. “Sensationalism sells, and that’s what this is. I can imagine what they’d do if they found out I’m pregnant.”

“Then you should stay here until Anakin returns,” Sola said. ‘Once he’s back, things will go back to normal.’ She smiled. “Can you imagine what he’d do if he saw those reporters hounding you that way?”

Padmé nodded. She knew exactly what he’d do. “It’s probably best he doesn’t know,” she said. “He tends to be somewhat protective of me.”

“Now there’s an understatement,” Jobal commented with a smile. “I wish I could have seen him handle Palo,” she added.

“He would have killed Palo if I hadn’t stopped him,” Padmé said. “And if he knew that I’d run into him yesterday…”

“You did?” Jobal asked. “Where? You didn’t say anything!”

“At the baby shop,” Padmé said. “He was with that slapper who used to be my assistant. She’s pregnant too, with his child.”

“I didn’t see them,” Sola put in. “Though I wish now that I had.”

“You were paying for the sleepers,” Padmé told her. “I gave them both a good piece of my mind. Can you believe Palo actually told Ella that I was pining away for him?”

“I never did like that man,” Jobal said, shaking her head. “He always seemed just a little too smooth for my liking.”

“Well he’s out of my life, and that’s all that matters now,” Padmé said. ‘I only wish Anakin had been there to see me put him in his place.’ She smiled. “He would have told me how impressed he was, and reminded me that he’d always known I had a ruthless streak in me, and would have called me Senator..” She stopped as memories of him filled her mind, constricting her throat and making her heart ache with missing him. “I miss him so much,” she said softly as the tears filled her eyes.

Jobal and Sola looked at one another, neither one knowing what to say at this point. Neither knew where he was, or when he was coming back, or even if he was. All they could do was support Padmé through this time and remain optimistic for her sake.

"I know you do, love," Jobal said, coming over to Padmé and putting her arms around her. "He'll be back soon, I know he will. Have you checked your messages today? Perhaps there's some news from one of the bounty hunters you hired."

"No, I haven't," Padmé replied. "It's just so discouraging checking all the time only to learn nothing."

"That's understandable," Sola said. "But one of these days there is bound to be some good news, Padmé. Why don't you check?"

"You haven't checked your messages since yesterday," Jobal reminded her.

Padmé sighed, knowing her mother and sister were as persistent as she herself was. "I'll check," she said, standing up from the chair. "But it won't do any good."

Jobal smiled. "Maybe not," she said. "But maybe you'll be surprised."

Padmé shook her head as she walked over to the computer in the next room, her mother and sister following behind her. She sat down at the screen and punched in her access code and then waited for a few moments while the link was established. Her inbox showed that she had six messages.

"Six!" Sola exclaimed in excitement. "See? This is it, Padmé!"

"I get six messages in an hour sometimes, Sola," Padmé assured her, loading up the messages. 'It's probably just work related.' She sighed as she scrolled through the messages. As she had thought, every one of them originated from Coruscant, from within the Senate building itself. Except for the last one. It was from Tatooine. Padmé frowned, puzzled for a moment, and then remembered the comlink she'd left with Shmi. A glimmer of hope entered her heart. "It must be Ani's mom," she said, clicking on the message.

"Maybe she's heard something," Jobal said, trying not to get her hopes up.

"Or maybe she's just seeing if I've heard anything," Padmé said. She sat back as the message finished loading and sat back in the chair to watch it. All three women gave a shriek of excitement when they saw Anakin appear on the screen, and then immediately grew silent to listen to the message.

Hello Padmé. I'm contacting you from Tatooine, from the space port in Mos Espa. I've been here more than a week now. You see my ship crashed, and I... well, I kind of lost my memory. It's been coming back, but I'm still pretty messed up. I remember you, though, I've dreamed of you almost every night I've been here, and saw you on the holonet last night. That's how I knew how to contact you. This all must sound really crazy, I must sound crazy too, but I'm stranded here, no ship, and no money to get home. And I want to come home, Padmé. I miss you. I hope you get this and find a way to get here soon so we can be together. I have to go; my money only bought me a few minutes worth of time on this thing. I hope to see you soon, Padmé. I love you.

Padmé was shaking with emotion by the end of the message, the tears streaming down her face. "Ani!" she said softly. 'My poor Ani!' She looked up at her mother and sister. "I have to go to Tatooine!" she told them. "I have to find him!"

Jobal and Sola looked at one another, both hesitant to say what was on their mind.

“Padmé, I think you ought to send someone to get him,” Jobal finally said. “Space travel can be dangerous when you’re so early in your pregnancy.”

Padmé frowned. “Mom, I have to do this,” she said. “I’ll be fine. Besides, Tatooine isn’t that far away.”

Jobal frowned, and looked at Sola for support.

“I’ll come with you,” Sola said. “Let’s contact Captain Typho.”

Tatooine

More than thirty-six hours had elapsed since Anakin had sent his message, and there was still no sign of Padmé. Anakin did his best not to worry, but the longer he waited, the more impossible it became not to.

Despite his better judgment, Cedler had agreed to allow Anakin to fly his pod racer in the upcoming race. Anakin had spent every extra hour he had fine tuning the racer, and had logged many hours in it, familiarizing himself with the controls. The more time he spent in it, however, the more convinced he was that he’d flown it before. In fact, he was almost certain that he’d actually built the racer in the first place. Which could mean only one thing: he was the slave boy, the only human who had ever competed in a pod race.

“You don’t know that for sure, Anakin,” Cedler said as Anakin did one last tune up on the craft. The race was early the next morning, and he wanted to be sure that it was in tip top shape. “You don’t remember your own mother’s name, how can you be so sure that...”

“Shmi,” Anakin said without looking up. “My mother’s name is Shmi.”

Cedler rolled his eyes. One thing he’d discovered about the unusual young man in his employ was that he was tenacious almost to the point of obsession.

“Okay, great,” Cedler said. “You remember her name. But are you really going to risk your life on a hunch? Your wife is coming here to find you; do you really want her to find a corpse?”

Anakin stood up and looked at him. To Cedler’s utter exasperation he was actually smiling. “Your confidence in me is really touching, Ced,” he said. “I’m going to win this race,” he assured him.

“But why do you need to?” Cedler asked. “You don’t need the money; your wife is coming here! I don’t understand why you’d take such a chance.”

Anakin shrugged as he wiped his hands on a rag. “Maybe I’m crazy,” he said, looking at the racer. “Maybe I have something to prove,” he continued. “Or maybe I just want to see if I can do it. I don’t know. All I know is that prize money would buy the freedom of a lot of slaves, Ced. And I know now that I was once a slave, I’m certain of it. Perhaps that’s my motivation. Does that make any sense?”

Cedler signed in resignation. “I suppose so,” replied. “One thing is for sure, you are the most stubborn man I have ever met, Anakin Skywalker.”

Anakin laughed. “Now I *know* that isn’t the first time I’ve been told that before,” he said.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51

Chapter 51

Tatooine

"I think I'm pregnant, Anakin," she told him finally.

When he did not say anything in response, Padmé looked up at him. "Please say something," she said quietly.

Anakin was too shocked to say anything for a moment, the thought of a baby so far from his mind that he was unprepared with a response. "Pregnant?" he said at last. "You're pregnant??"

"I don't know for sure," she said, "but..."

He pushed his chair out and stood up suddenly, and then turned her chair so that she was facing him. Kneeling down on the floor before her, he brought a large hand to her abdomen, his face a picture of concentration.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Seeing if you're pregnant," he told her.

"How can you tell?" she asked.

But Anakin didn't reply, for his mind was too focused on searching out the depths of her womb for any sign of life. He knew instinctively that he would recognize it, that his child would have a Force presence even at this early stage.

Padmé watched him, fascinated. She wasn't sure what to expect; would he be happy if she was pregnant? Or would it only complicate things?

And then he smiled. "Guess what?" he said as he looked up at her.

"What?" she asked.

"There are two of them," he told her as his smile grew. "You're carrying twins, Senator."

*Anakin woke up to the sound of the alarm beside his bed. He opened his eyes and smiled as the images of his dream still lingered in his mind. *We're having twins*, he remembered as he climbed out of bed, *a girl and a boy...**

"Anakin? You up?"

"Yeah, I'll be right there," Anakin said as he pulled on his trousers. A sense of excitement and anticipation filled him as he headed to the fresher to get washed up. The race was part of it, but the larger reason was the possibility that today would be the day he would be reunited

with his wife. The dream he'd had of her that night had made his need of her even greater, his impatience to see her even worse. *Today will be the day*, he told himself; *I'm sure of it*.

"I can't believe you're actually going through with his," Frann grumbled as she set some breakfast on the table before Anakin. "Pod racing is so dangerous, Anakin. Surely you must see that."

Anakin smiled. "Don't worry," he told her. "I know what I'm doing."

Frann simply shook her head as she continued bustling about the small kitchen, muttering under her breath about reckless young men.

"Good morning Sky!" Enna said as she entered the kitchen.

Anakin looked up and smiled at her. "Good morning," he said. "I see you managed to talk your parents into yet another day," he commented.

Enna nodded. "I told them you were racing today," she told him. "They let me stay to see the race."

"She's very good at getting her way," Jonn commented. "Spoiled little chit that she is," he added with a wink to his niece.

Enna gave a sigh of exasperation as she helped her aunt with breakfast, deciding to ignore her uncle's comment.

Naboo

"Senator, I really don't like this," Captain Typho said with a frown. "Tatooine is a lawless, wild planet. I wish you would reconsider this."

"My husband is there and needs my help," Padmé retorted as she stood her ground. "He is stranded there and has no money to get home. What would you suggest I do? Leave him there??"

"No, of course not!" Typho replied. 'I will go,' he suggested. "I will find him and bring him here."

Padmé shook her head. "That's not good enough!" she replied hotly. She felt her emotions threatening to overwhelm her, and took a deep breath. Luckily her sister stepped in at this point.

"Captain, I am going with her," Sola said calmly. "I will not allow anything to happen to her, surely you know that."

Typho looked at Sola, deciding that there were no more stubborn women in the galaxy than the Naberrie women. "Very well," he sighed, relenting at last. "When did you want to leave, Senator?" he asked Padmé.

"Right now," Padmé said at once. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Typho replied. "I readied the ship when your sister contacted me earlier. I was hoping you'd have seen reason by now, but obviously you're more determined than I realized."

Padmé smiled. “You ought to know me better than that by now, Captain,” she said. “Now let’s go.”

Tatooine –Mos Espa Arena

The arena was crowded and noisy as the pod racers moved into position. Anakin was doing a last minute check on the racer when Cedler joined him.

“Everything all set?” he asked, his nervousness impossible to hide.

Anakin nodded. He looked up at the older man. “How are you holding out?” he asked.

“Me? Oh I’m just dandy,” he replied.

Anakin grinned. “Yeah, I can tell,” he responded.

“Well there’s a lot riding on this race,” Cedler reminded him. “And I’m not talking about the money.”

“I know what’s riding on this,” Anakin replied. “And believe me; I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t know I could win.”

“I know, I know,” Cedler replied. He ran a hand over his grizzled chin. “Just don’t do anything foolish, okay? I mean, anything else foolish,” he said with a smile.

Anakin laughed. “No worries, my friend,” he said. He looked up at the royal box where the huts were shuffling into place. “Looks like they’re about ready to start,” he said.

Cedler nodded. “I’d better get going then,” he said. “Good luck, son,” he said, holding out a hand to Anakin.

“Thanks Ced,” Anakin replied, shaking Cedler’s hand. “Thanks for everything.”

Padmé’s cruiser— en route to Tatooine

Padmé paced up and down the small passenger lounge, the anxiety and restlessness growing within her with each minute that passed. Sola watched her, knowing that urging her to try to relax would only fall on deaf ears. If Sola had ever had any doubts about Padmé’s feelings for her husband, they had been allayed in recent days. It was clear that Padmé was utterly lost without Anakin. Sola had never seen her sister so single minded about anything, even the political crusades she championed. No, this was personal, and that gave it a much greater sense of urgency.

“ETA Captain?” Padmé asked into her comlink for what seemed to Sola to be the hundredth time.

“We’re about to revert to sublight, Senator,” came the reply. “Strap yourselves in, ladies. We’ll be there shortly.”

Padmé looked over at Sola. “Here we go,” she said, the excitement evident in her voice.

Sola nodded with a smile. “You heard the captain, strap yourself in,” she said.

Padmé did so at once, her heart starting to race within her. *Hold on Anakin*, she thought, hoping he would hear her through their bond; *I’m coming*.

Tatooine— Mos Espa Arena

The deafening roar of engines filled the arena, rivaled only by the cheers of the crowd as they anxiously awaited the start of the race.

Anakin gripped the steering rods tightly, as a wave of memory washed over him. He was now certain that he'd raced this craft before, and that he'd raced here, at this arena before. What he didn't remember was if he'd ever managed to win. *Minor detail*, he decided as he focused his mind on the daunting task that lay ahead. And while he was doing so, he heard his wife's declaration: *Hold on Anakin... I'm coming*. He smiled, her devotion and love for him giving him an extra boost of confidence.

Up in the royal box, Jabba the Hutt bit off the head of a frog and spat it at a gong, signaling the start of the race. On a bridge over the track, a great green light at the center flashed. The podracers shot forward with a high-pitched scream of engines.

Anakin was the first out of the gate, instinctively using the Force to guide his racer. He found that he could see the moves of the other racers moments before they happened, and this enabled him to execute countermoves that put him into the lead position. Soaring over the desert sands, Anakin pushed the racer for all it had, increasing the distance between him and the rest of the pilots. *This is going to be easy*, he thought with a smile as he entered a narrow canyon bordered by steep cliffs. Just then he felt something hit the back of his pod, and glanced up briefly to see four Tusken Raiders perched above the race course fire their rifles at the pods racing in the canyon below them. Anakin frowned, and used the Force to send the Tuskens away from the edge of the cliff, causing them to drop their weapons and scurry away in fright. With a smile Anakin returned his focus to the race.

Padmé, Sola and Captain Typho left Mos Espa's space port and headed into town. It was already very hot, for the twins suns had already raised high into the sky. Padmé had almost forgotten the oppressiveness of the Tatooine heat, and found that it was exacerbating the nausea she had been fighting all day. Sola noticed how uneasy her sister looked, and grew concerned.

"Let's find somewhere to sit down," Sola suggested. "You need to get out of this heat."

"I'm fine," Padmé insisted. "I need to find Anakin."

"We will find him," Sola replied. 'I'm worried about you, Padmé,' she said. "This heat is terrible. You need a rest, you need..."

"I've had plenty of rest all the way here," Padmé countered, not letting her sister dissuade her. "I'm going to find him, Sola, even if I have to go alone to do it."

Sola and Typho looked at one another, both knowing Padmé well enough to realize that her threat was not an idle one.

"Very well," Sola said. "Let's go and ask around. Surely in a place this small it won't be hard to find him."

The town was small, but, as they soon discovered, it was very quiet. Some of the small shops were closed, and there were very few people shopping in the open market that

comprised much of the downtown sector.

“Where is everybody?” Typho wondered aloud as the three of them stood in the street looking around in bewilderment. “Is everyone asleep?”

“There’s a cantina down there,” Padmé said, pointing in the direction of a rather rough looking establishment at the end of the street. “Let’s go ask in there.”

Typho looked at her with a frown. “Senator, you are *not* going in there,” he stated emphatically. “Do you know what kind of beings frequent places like that?”

“Yes,” Padmé said, starting off down the street, forcing her companions to follow her.

It wasn’t too soon into the race that Anakin became aware that there was at least one competitor whose methods were less than honorable. Although he couldn’t be certain, it seemed to Anakin that the pilot was Charra, the very creature he had encountered days earlier in the streets of Mos Espa, the creature that had been the owner of the boy Jakob and his mother. Anakin’s grip tightened on the steering rods as he remembered the cruel manner in which the creature had treated the young boy. He glanced in his rearview mirror to see the Charra drive his pod into his rival, forcing him into the wall of a large rock formation. The unfortunate creature crashed in a spectacular display of fire and smoke. Anakin frowned, and returned his attention to the race, determined not to let the underhanded creature get the better of him.

Cantina

“What can I get you, pretty lady?” the barkeep at the cantina asked Padmé as she came up to stand at the bar.

“I need information,” she said, placing a pile of money on the bar.

The man’s eyes were immediately drawn to the money, which was more than he made in a year. He then looked back up at Padmé. “What information would that be?” he asked.

“I’m looking for this man,” she said, showing him a likeness of Anakin. “His name is Anakin Skywalker; he crashed here about a week or so back. Have you seen him?”

The man took the holo from her and studied it for a moment. “Yeah, I’ve seen him,” he said. “He’s been in here once or twice. He works over at the junk shop down the street.”

“The junk shop is closed,” Typho put in. “Like just about everything else around here.”

“Yeah, the pod races shut down the whole damn town,” the man grumbled. “Luckily they’re plenty thirsty when they’re done watching,” he added with a grin that revealed more than one rotten tooth.

“Pod race? Did you say pod race?” Padmé asked.

The man nodded. “Yes m’am,” he replied. “There’s one going on right now over at the arena. As a matter of fact, I heard a rumor that this Skywalker fellow is racing in it. Can you believe it?”

Padmé's eyes widened in surprise, and she looked up at her companions.

"How do we get there?" Typho asked.

"Not hard," the man replied. "Here, I'll show you."

Anakin continued to power around corners and over hills and cliffs, leaving the other racers in the dust. There was one pilot who was starting to gain on him, however, the creature Charra. Charra slowed a little, and as another pilot pulled alongside him, he opened a side vent on his racer's engine. Soon the exhaust started to cut through the alien's engine, resulting, in short order, in an explosion. Charra neatly swerved to avoid the blast and continued in his pursuit of the leader.

Anakin noticed the explosion, and also noticed that Charra was gaining on him. He squeezed more power from the engines of his own craft as he zoomed over the Dune Sea, kicking up a cloud of sand as he sped close to the surface. Going over a jump, the pod shook violently, but he held on. A racer a few lengths back wasn't so fortunate, however and ended up exploding as one of his engines was caught in the sand. *Another one down*, Anakin thought grimly, realizing now why his friends had been so against the idea of him racing. One wrong move, one bad decision and it would cost a driver his life. *That's not going to happen*, he decided with determination. *There's too much riding on this... I have too much to live for.*

The roar of the crowd was deafening as Padmé, Sola and Typho entered the arena. Padmé was beginning to wish she'd listened to her sister and had taken the time to have a cold drink, for she was beginning to feel light headed in the tremendous heat.

"Let's find a place to sit," Sola said, taking Padmé by the arm. The arena was very crowded, however, and seats were hard to come by. Sola and Typho were both very concerned about Padmé, however, and looked aggressively, not caring whose toes they stepped on in their search for seats. All of a sudden, quite unexpectedly, a man approached them. He was looking at Padmé as though he knew her.

"Excuse me," the man said. "But are you Padmé? Padmé Skywalker?"

Padmé nodded. "Yes I am!" she said. "How did you know?"

The man smiled. "I saw you on the holonet," he explained. 'Your husband is staying with my family.' He extended a hand to her. "I'm Jonn Mendosa, Mrs. Skywalker. Welcome to Tatooine."

Padmé wanted to kiss the man she was so relieved to find someone who'd made contact with Anakin. "I'm so happy to meet you," she said with a wan smile. "Anakin is racing, isn't he?"

"Against my advice, yes," Jonn replied. "He seems to like to do things his own way," he remarked.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, that's Anakin," she replied.

“Excuse me, but we need to get Padmé to a seat,” Sola cut in. ‘She’s in no condition to be standing out here in the blazing hot sun,’ she added, looking at her sister. “Anakin isn’t the only one who likes to do things their own way,” she couldn’t resist throwing in.

Jonn nodded, remembering how Anakin had mentioned that he remembered that his wife was pregnant. “Of course,” he said. “Come with me, we have a place you can sit.”

“How far into the race are they?” Typho asked as they made their way to Jonn’s seats.

“About half way,” Jonn replied. ‘Anakin’s been in the lead, but he’s getting some competition right now from a sleemo named Charra. Cheating bastard, excuse my language,’ he said. “I just hope he doesn’t try anything on the last lap.”

Padmé frowned, the man’s words doing nothing to alleviate her worry. She sat down and looked down at the race track, not having any idea which one of the racers was Anakin. “Where is he?” she asked.

“He’ll be coming into the arena soon,” Jonn said as he reached their seats. “Look who I found,” he said to his friends and family.

Cedler, Mari, Frann and the girls looked up with surprise as Padmé took a seat.

“Anakin will be so happy to see you,” Frann said as she shook Padmé’s hand. Cedler and Mari did likewise. The girls, however, simply continued to watch the race, not wanting to meet the beautiful woman who turned out to be quite real, despite their hopes to the contrary.

“Here he comes,” Cedler said, pointing down at the arena. “He’s entering the second lap.”

Padmé watched as Anakin sped through the arena, with another racer close on his tail. “Is that the one you were telling us about?” she asked, pointing to Charra’s racer.

“Yeah, that’s him,” Jonn said with a frown. “Anakin’s been holding him off. Don’t worry, Padmé. Your husband is one hell of a pilot. Best I’ve ever seen.”

Padmé smiled as her eyes followed Anakin through the arena before he disappeared once more. “Yes he is the best,” she agreed, pride filling her.

One down two to go, Anakin told himself as he flew threw the arena. He knew that Charra was close on his heels, doing anything and everything he could to gain ground. As another racer got too close to him, Charra broke off a small part off his pod, sending it into the alien’s engine, causing him to veer into the rear of Anakin’s pod. The contact caused one of the main straps that linked the pod to the engines on his racer to become unhooked.

Anakin concentrated as he struggled to keep control of the pod, which was whipping about wildly. Finally, using the Force, he reached out and grabbed the strap as the pod swung near it, and managed to replace it. But his momentary loss of control also caused him to lose the lead, as Charra now lead by a narrow margin.

Determined not to let his adversary win, Anakin pushed the pod harder, gaining ground rapidly on Charra. Finally he caught up with him; the two ran neck and neck over the rough terrain. Padmé held her breath and the two teenage girls screamed as Anakin came through the arena once more. The lights in the tower indicated that this was the third and last lap. Charra, desperate to win now, maneuvered his side exhaust port to try to cut through Anakin’s engines. Anakin was able to avoid having his engines disabled, but was forced off course. His

pod racer went careening off the track and onto the service ramp. Admonishing himself for his carelessness, Anakin took a tight corner, diving to the inside and once more taking the lead.

Charra was infuriated. He pushed his racer harder, staying right on Anakin's tail, attempting to crowd him and push him through the turns. But Anakin was the stronger of the two, and managed to avoid the alien's attempts. However the strain he was placing on his racer caused one of the engine parts to shake loose. Anakin saw it, and quickly switched over to an auxiliary system. While he was trying to accomplish this maneuver, Charra raced past him. Anakin tried to get around Charra but to no avail. Every move Anakin made, Charra was able to block. Finally, Anakin faked a move into the inside then tried to go around Charra on the outside. They raced side by side down the final stretch of the track, as the crowd went wild with excitement.

Charra veered toward Anakin in an attempt to bang into his pod. Eventually he crashed into Anakin, and the two pods became hooked together.

Sola felt her sister's hand grab hers tightly as they witnessed the drama unfolding on the race track below them. Padmé said nothing, but Sola knew how frightened she was. Truth be told, she was frightened too. It was clear that the alien on Anakin's tail would stop at nothing to win.

"He'll be fine, Padmé," Cedler assured her. "He's knows that pod inside and out. That Charra doesn't know who he's up against."

Padmé simply nodded, her eyes fixed on the situation below.

"Nice try, Human," Charra sneered at Anakin.

Anakin frowned, as he fought to unlock the steering rods by trying to pull away from Charra. The strain on the steering rod was tremendous. Suddenly, Anakin's steering arm broke, and his pod started spinning. The release of tension sent Charra into an ancient statue. One engine exploded, and then the other, engulfing the entire pod racer in a huge fire ball. Anakin flew through the explosion as the crowd stood, cheering.

"He did it! He did it!" Padmé exclaimed as she embraced her sister tightly as Anakin raced over the finish line.

The crowd cheered wildly as Anakin emerged from the pod. He removed his helmet and waved to the crowd, the dirt on his face not hiding his enormous smile. And then, as he stood there, a tremendously strong feeling came over him, and he knew. *Padmé is here*, he thought with certainty; *I can feel her presence...*

Ignoring the crowds that were starting to gather to congratulate him, Anakin started into the arena seats, pushing past the still cheering race fans. He couldn't see her, not yet, but her presence drew him like a moth to a flame. Padmé stood on tiptoe to see where he was, puzzled when she didn't see him on the track. Sola tapped her on the shoulder, and Padmé looked up to her.

"What is it?" Padmé asked. "Do you see him?"

"He's coming this way," Sola told her, pointing in Anakin's direction.

Padmé looked in the direction her sister had indicated and then broke in to a run as she saw Anakin approaching her.

Finally Anakin saw her, and moved faster, his impatience making it difficult for him not to push people out of his way.

“Ani!” she cried as they drew closer. “Ani!!”

Anakin smiled and sprinted the last few meters, knocking people aside, not caring if he did so. He needed to feel her in his arms, to touch her, to know that she was real, and he wasn’t about to let anyone or anything stand in his way.

And then finally she was in his arms, her own arms wrapped tightly around his neck.

“Angel!” he cried, holding her tightly.

“I’ve missed you so much!” Padmé cried, burying her face against his neck.

Anakin took her face in his hands, as a thousand memories of her flashed through his mind. “I’ve missed you,” he told her, bringing his mouth to hers and kissing her deeply. Around them the cheers of the crowd only increased as they witnessed this tender, emotional reunion. But neither of them cared, or even noticed, for all that mattered was that they were together once more, together and complete.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52

"Ani, I've been so worried!" Padmé said, taking his face in her hands. "Where did this come from?" she asked, touching the scar over his eye gently. "Did this happen in the crash?" she asked with a frown.

"Yes," he told her. "I got a little impatient with the bandages."

She shook her head. "Are you okay now? You said you'd lost your memory."

"I did," he replied. "But it's been coming back slowly. In fact...."

He was prevented from continuing by a mob of race fans who had approached them and surrounded Anakin. They were so excited by his thrilling victory that they slapped him on the back and shook his hand, all wanting to be close to the hero who had done what no human had ever done before.

"Padmé!" Anakin called as the crowd pulled him away from her and towards the royal box.

Padmé was helpless to prevent the crowd from taking Anakin away, and could only watch as they brought him to collect his prize.

"Where are they taking him?" Sola asked as she reached her sister.

Padmé shook her head. "I don't know," she replied.

"They're probably taking him to collect his money," Jonn suggested as he joined them. "There were a lot of bets on this race," he told Padmé. "The purse is bound to be a big one."

"Anakin doesn't need money," Sola commented, "why would he take such a chance unnecessarily?"

"Until recently Anakin didn't know who he was or who his wife was," Frann explained. "He was trying to make enough money to buy passage off of the planet."

"But he sent me the message two days ago," Padmé put in. "And yet he competed today anyway. Surely he must have realized I would come for him."

"He wasn't entirely sure, to be honest," Jonn told her. "He wasn't sure what the status of your relationship was, actually."

"But I'd say it's pretty clear how you two feel about one another," Mari said with a smile.

Padmé smiled, watching as Anakin entered the royal box. "I suppose so," she replied. "I've been lost without him," she added, her eyes not leaving Anakin.

Mara and Enna, who had reluctantly joined the adults, looked at one another in annoyance. Padmé noticed the exchange, and turned her attention to the girls.

"I must thank you all for taking such good care of him," she said.

"Enna here found him," Jonn said, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Saw the ship crash, didn't you?"

Enna nodded.

"You found him?" Padmé asked the girl.

"Well, me and my dad," she replied. "He wanted to come to the race, but it's the harvest and he couldn't get away."

Padmé nodded in understanding. "I want to thank you for helping him, Enna," she said. "If you hadn't done so, he might not be alive today."

Enna smiled, charmed by Padmé despite her childlike envy of her. "Sky is really a cool guy," she said. "I liked helping him."

"Sky?" Padmé asked, "is that what you've been calling him?"

"Well he didn't know his own name in the beginning," Frann explained. "That's all he could remember. Sky."

"Skywalker," Padmé replied. "Of course. So he remembered his name on his own then? His memory is intact now?"

"Not quite," Cedler said. "Although he remembers some things, others are still foggy. I think the first thing he remembered was your name, actually," he told Padmé with a smile.

"Really?" Padmé replied, moved to hear it.

Frann nodded. "Yes, there's been no doubt all along about his devotion to you."

Mara expelled a loud breath at this point, having heard more than she could bear. Everyone turned and looked at her, for her expulsion had been louder than she'd planned it to be.

"Oh don't mind my cousin," Enna said, enjoying Mara's embarrassment. "She's got the hots for Anakin big time."

Padmé merely smiled as the young woman's face turned a bright shade of red. Mara gave Enna a dirty look before storming off.

"I suppose you're used to that," Mari said. "Anakin is an attractive man."

Padmé shrugged. "It's never been an issue, really," she replied.

"Well that's only because he's so madly in love with you," Sola put in, linking her arm through Padmé's.

Padmé smiled, and looked up towards the royal box. "I wonder what's taking so long?" she asked.

Royal box

"Well, well, I never thought I'd see you again," Jabba said to Anakin as the crowd presented him to the Hutt gangster.

Although he understood the language of the Hutt, Anakin did not remember him. “Do we know one another?” he asked.

Jabba was surprised by the question, and then laughed loudly, making his large rolls of flab jiggle.

“Okay, okay,” Jabba said through his laughter. ‘Have it your way, Skywalker. You don’t want to remember? That’s fine with me. You made me a lot of money today,’ he continued. “A human who can handle a pod racer is rare enough, but one that can win the race, that’s priceless.”

Anakin merely shrugged in response, anxious to get back to his wife.

“How would you like to work for me, Skywalker?” Jabba asked. “I’d split the money you make with me. I’d give you thirty percent, how does that sound?”

“I’m not interested,” Anakin said. “Thanks anyway.”

Jabba frowned, and let a loud fart escape to show his displeasure. “Thirty not enough, eh?” he said at last. “Okay... thirty-five.”

Anakin shook his head.

“Forty! And that’s it, Skywalker,” Jabba grunted.

Anakin smiled. “Look, Jabba,” he said. “It’s not the money; it’s just that I have no desire to stay here. I have a wife, we’re expecting twins. My life is elsewhere, Jabba.”

Jabba sighed loudly, and nodded his enormous head. “A pity,” he said. ‘You’d have made me a lot of money, Skywalker. But, you’re a free man, I can’t force you to stay.’ He turned to his assistant and motioned for him to come forward. “Here’s your money,” he said. “You earned it. I threw in a bonus for getting rid of that sleemo Charra for me too.”

Anakin wanted to laugh, but sensed that Jabba wasn’t joking. “That’s very generous of you,” he said, taking the money. “Thank you.”

Jabba nodded, and then waved him away. Anakin turned to leave, glancing down at the wad of money in his hand. It seemed strange and extraneous to him now, now that his wife had come to bring him home.

The crowd of fans had begun to disperse when Anakin emerged from the royal box. He took a moment to stop and count the money, astonished by how much it was. *I don’t need this money*, he thought to himself as he made his way down to the seats once more; *but I know someone who does*.

“Here he comes now,” Jonn said as he saw Anakin approaching them.

Padmé, who had been sitting down, stood up at once and looked over in the direction Jonn was looking in. The sight of him sent a thrill through her, and she smiled, still hardly able to believe he was truly there.

Padmé simply watched him as he approached, sensing that there was something different about him now. Part of it was his appearance, she realized as she noted how blond the suns had bleached his hair, which was now longer than she’d ever seen it and tied up behind his

head. He was more tanned than he'd been as well. But there was something intangible about him that was different as well, and Padmé wasn't sure if it was his loss of memory, the accident, or the dire situation he'd found himself in that had caused the change; but whatever the reason, it was undeniable.

"Look at that wad of cash!" Cedler said as Anakin reached them. He gave a whoop of excitement and slapped Anakin on the back. "Way to go, son!"

Anakin smiled, and handed it to Cedler. "Here," he said. 'I don't need this,' he told him. "Divide it up among yourselves, including Kaleb."

"Anakin, you earned this!" Jonn said, shocked by the young man's generosity. "You worked so hard for this money!"

"I couldn't have done it without all of you," Anakin replied. "Besides, I don't need it. I'm sure you could all use it more than me."

"Anakin, that's very generous of you," Frann said. 'But at least keep some of it,' she insisted. "Please."

Anakin looked at his wife who merely smiled. "Very well," he said. "I'll keep some for my mother."

"Good idea," Padmé replied.

Anakin smiled, walking over to her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Right now, however, I think we ought to take our friends out for a celebratory dinner," he said. "What do you think?" he asked, looking down at her.

"I think maybe you need to get washed up first," she teased, brushing some more of the dirt from his face.

"I second the motion," Frann piped up.

Anakin laughed. "Okay, I can see I'm out numbered," he said.

Padmé laughed too, and wrapped her arms around his waist, not caring how dirty he was. He was alive, he was uninjured, and that's all that mattered.

After Anakin had a quick clean up at the home of Jonn and Frann Mendosa, the large group headed to the only restaurant in Mos Espa for a celebratory meal. Jonn had contacted his brother and sister-in-law who made the trip up to join in the celebration. Captain Typho, however, feeling that he had done his duty and was feeling rather like a fish out of water, had chartered a ship back to Naboo. Sola had opted to go with him, feeling badly for having left her young children so suddenly. Padmé had tried to convince them to stay, but both had politely declined.

Had Sola stayed, she would have found herself something of a fifth wheel, however. Anakin and Padmé were totally oblivious of everyone around them as they reconnected, even though all around them the three families were having a boisterously good time. They only had eyes for one another, the joy of being reunited superseding everything else around them.

"We ought to go see your mother," Padmé told him. "She's worried about you."

“She knows what happened?” he asked.

“All she knows is that you went missing,” she told him. “I came here when you first disappeared, thinking you may have come here first. But she hadn’t heard from you.”

Anakin nodded, still somewhat foggy about the circumstances that landed him here in the first place. “Why don’t we go tonight?” he suggested. “Maybe seeing her will help trigger more memories.”

“I’m sure it will,” she said with a smile. She couldn’t help but notice the intensity of the way he was looking at her. “And maybe when we’re alone some other memories will come back to you,” she added.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I was thinking that too,” he said, running a finger down the side of her face. ‘I’ve been dreaming of you almost every night I’ve been here,’ he told her. “And I have to tell you, some of the dreams I’ve had...” he stopped, shaking his head in amazement. “Wow.”

Padmé smiled. “Dreams? Or memories?” she asked.

Anakin raised his eyebrows. “Well, I’m hoping they were memories,” he said with a smile. “I suppose in time I’ll know for sure.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said. It was all both of them could do to keep their hands to themselves, for they were both in desperate need of the other. But they were not alone, and they were in public, and their friends were there in their honor. So they did their best to engage in the festivities, all the while anxious to be alone with one another.

“Are you sure you won’t spend the night?” Frann asked when they returned to the house later on.

“No, I’m anxious to see my mother,” Anakin said. “Padmé tells me that she’s very worried. I want to let her know I’m okay.”

“That’s understandable,” Jonn commented. “Where is she?”

Anakin looked at his wife, realizing that he didn’t know where she was.

“Not far from Mos Eisley,” Padmé told them.

“We’ll come back before we leave Tatooine to say goodbye,” Anakin told them.

“Well I hope so,” Frann said with a smile. “You’ve become like one of the family, Anakin. We’ll really miss you when you leave.”

Anakin smiled. “I’ll miss all of you as well,” he told her. He looked back at Padmé. “All set?” he asked.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she said. “The ship is at the space port.”

“That’s not far,” he told her. “Let’s go before it gets dark.”

After saying goodnight to their friends, Anakin and Padmé left the Mendosa house, heading for the Mos Espa space port.

Chapter 53

Chapter 53

"Do you want me to pilot the ship?" Padmé asked as they reached the space port.

Anakin looked down at her with a smile. "I remember how to fly," he told her. "Didn't you see that race?"

Padmé smiled. "Yes, I know you remember how to fly," she replied. "But you don't remember where your mother is."

"Ah yes," he replied as they reached the ship. 'That's true,' he said, looking up at the ship. He ran a hand over the hull, the sight of it familiar to him. "I've flown this before," he said.

"Yes you have," she replied. "Many times."

Anakin nodded. He knew where to activate the ramp and stepped back as it lowered to the floor. "After you, Milady," he said.

Padmé had hoped he'd have remembered his nick name for her by now, Senator; but it seemed that he had not. She found it ironic that as many times as she'd been annoyed by his use of her formal title, she now longed to hear him say it.

"Where to?" he asked as he lifted the ship out of the hangar.

"North," she told him, setting the coordinates.

"How long will it take to get us there?" he asked, studying the navicomputer.

"Not long," she said. She looked up at him. 'I know you're anxious to see her,' she said. "She'll be so relieved."

Anakin nodded. "I have little memory of her," he said with a frown. "Even now. I know her name, but very little else."

"It will come back to you," she told him. "Just as everything else is."

"I know," he said. "You know, I remembered your name before my own," he told her with a smile.

Padmé smiled. "That's remarkable," she told him.

"Is it?" he said, reaching his hand out to take hers. 'I've felt certain that there was someone in my life from the moment I woke up after the crash,' he told her. "I didn't even know how I got there, but that was the one thing I was certain of. You."

Padmé was moved by his words. "Ani," she said softly. 'I was so afraid I'd lost you forever,' she told him. "I was afraid you'd died..." she stopped as tears filled her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said, brushing them away impatiently. "I seem to cry so easily these days."

"Pregnancy does that to a woman," he remarked.

She looked up at him in surprise. "You remember that too?"

Anakin nodded. "Of course," he said. 'I remember how we found out too,' he told her with a smile. "I remember telling you that you were carrying twins."

Padmé smiled. "Yes, you did," she said. 'I went to the doctor while you were gone,' she told him. "She was shocked that I was pregnant."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I'd been taking birth control," she told him. "It was something of a surprise to me as well, actually."

Anakin smiled. "I guess those babies inside of you are meant to be," he said.

Padmé nodded. It was clear that there were still large gaps in Anakin's memory, for his own uniqueness seemed still to be forgotten by him. A thought came to her, and she hardly knew how to formulate it into a question: does he remember Darth Vader? Does he know anything about that dark side of him?

"How did you come to learn your own name?" she asked him as he piloted the ship over the rapidly darkening sand dunes north of Mos Espa.

"I saw myself on the news," he told her. "I killed someone rather famous I take it," he added.

"Yes, the Chancellor," she told him.

Anakin nodded. "But he was more than that, wasn't he? According to the news he had plans to destroy the Jedi."

"Yes he did," she replied. "Plans that only you knew of. You're a hero, Ani."

"That's what they tell me," he said with a self deprecating smile.

"So... you heard them call you Anakin Skywalker? That's how you remembered?" she persisted.

"They used two names, actually," he replied. 'Darth Vader and Anakin Skywalker. Apparently I'm known by both.' He frowned. "I have no memory of the name Darth Vader," he told her. "None whatsoever."

Padmé nodded. It was all starting to make sense to her. *He has no memory of his dark side, and no memory of what Palpatine did to him. It is as though he was never Darth Vader at all...*

"So tell me something," Anakin said. "If my mother lives here, how did I come to live on Coruscant? Is that where we met?"

"No, we met on Alderaan," she told him. "At a party."

Anakin nodded, having no memory of the occasion. "I wish I could remember," he said with a sigh. "I wish I could remember our wedding, or when I proposed... I don't remember any of it."

Padmé made no reply, not wishing to tell him that their engagement and wedding had been far from conventional. She stood up and walked around to stand behind him. “Don’t worry,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck. “It will come back to you, I’m sure of it.”

Anakin nodded, hoping that she was right.

Following her directions, Anakin headed for the Lars farm, and set the craft down on the outskirts of the property. It was already dark, and both decided it would be prudent to spend the night in the ship rather than disturb the family at such a late hour.

“You know, there are ways of helping you remember certain aspects of your life,” she told him.

“Oh really?” he asked, turning in his chair to face her.

She nodded with a smile. “Yes,” she said.

“Care to share them with me?” he said.

Padmé thought for a moment before replying. “I think I’d rather show you,” she said as she stood up and started to unbutton her blouse. “Now, tell me if any of this triggers any memories,” she said as she pulled off her blouse.

Anakin watched her for a moment, and then pulled her into his embrace. “Let’s go to the cabin,” he whispered against her ear. “I want to kiss every part of you,” he told her, making her whimper with longing. Picking her up into his arms, Anakin carried Padmé into the back of the ship, where a small cabin was located. He laid her on the bed, taking a moment to simply drink in the beauty of her body.

“You’re so beautiful,” he told her as he lay down beside her tracing a finger down the length of one arm.

Padmé looked up at him, reaching up and taking his face in her hands. “That’s only because I’m so much in love,” she told him.

Anakin smiled. “You think so?” he asked, moving over to graze over her collar bone with his lips.

“Yes,” she sighed, running her hands into his hair. “Absolutely.”

“Of course,” he said, planting kisses down the length of her torso, “I’m rather consumed by love as well,” he told her, kissing further down her body.

“So... you mean love has blinded you then?” she teased.

Anakin looked up at her. “Well, that isn’t exactly what I meant,” he told her with a smile.

Padmé laughed. He was so different now, although the same man in many ways, in many ways he was not. It was as though the edge that had been forged in the Dark Side was gone, replaced with mellowness she’d never seen in him before. It was as though the fifteen years that he’d spent in fealty to Palpatine had never happened, and that he was the man he was meant to be. *But he will remember it soon enough*, she reminded herself; *and when he does... what will that do to him?*

A while later...

"That was amazing," Anakin said at last, smiling as he pushed a tendril of hair from his wife's face.

Padmé nodded. "Yes," she agreed breathlessly. "It was. I missed you so much," she told him, stroking his face gently.

Anakin took her hand and kissed it. "I was lost without you," he told her. He pulled her close to him and kissed the top of her head. Within moments they were both fast asleep, contented and complete once more.

The next morning...

Shmi and Beru had just sat down to enjoy their morning cup of tea when they heard someone descending the stone stairs that lead into the homestead.

"They must have forgotten something," Beru suggested, figuring that it was either Cliegg or Owen back from the fields. Both women looked up and then jumped to their feet when they saw Anakin and Padmé enter the room.

"Anakin!" Shmi cried, rushing to her son and embracing him tightly. "Thank the Maker you're alright!"

Anakin held his mother tightly, a flood of memories washing over him as he did so: memories of home, of a mother's love, of childhood.

"What happened, Ani?" Shmi asked as she released him finally. "Where have you been? Where did this scar come from?"

"I crashed, Mom," Anakin told her as they sat down at the table. "Right here on Tatooine as a matter of fact, just outside of Wayfare."

Shmi frowned. "Wayfare? Why didn't you come here? Why didn't you let me know where you were?"

"I had a pretty bad blow to the head in the crash, Mom," Anakin told her. "I lost my memory. I didn't even know my own name when I woke up."

Shmi's eyes widened at this, and she looked at Padmé. "So how did you find him?" she asked.

"He contacted me," Padmé told her. "It seems his memory has been coming back slowly," she added, looking at Anakin. "And once he remembered who I was and where I was, he sent me a message. When I got it, I came at once to Mos Espa to find him."

"You've been in Mos Espa all this time?" Shmi asked.

"Yes," Anakin said. "Working at a junk shop, fixing things to earn passage off of the planet."

Padmé could see that the same thought had passed through her mother-in-law's mind as her own; was the junk shop the one where he'd worked as a child? The one once owned by Watto?

"And then today," Anakin continued, "I won a race. A pod race, Mom, can you believe it?" He reached into the inner pocket of his tunic and produced a sizeable wad of cash. "I want

you to have this,” he told her, setting the money on the table. “This is part of my winnings. The rest I divided among the three families that have been helping me over the past few weeks.”

“Anakin, you don’t need to do this,” Shmi said.

“Mom, I don’t need the money,” Anakin said, pushing it towards her. ‘I’m sure this will go a long way here,’ he added. “Please.”

Shmi looked at her step daughter and then picked up the money. “This is very generous of you, Anakin,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Anakin replied with a smile.

“So have you got your memory back in full now?” Beru asked. “You remember everything?”

“No, unfortunately not,” Anakin replied. “There are still lots of holes that I’m working to fill in. But I’m getting there,” he added, looking at Padmé with a smile.

“Shmi! There’s a ship out on the western field!”

The four looked up as Cliegg entered the room. “Oh,” he said, ‘I guess I know why there’s a ship there,’ he said with a smile. “Good to see you, Anakin,” he said, extending a hand to his step son. “We’ve been worried about you.”

“Would you believe he’s been in Mos Espa all this time?” Shmi said to her husband.

“Really?” Cliegg said. “What the hell were you doing in that dump?”

“Working in a junk shop,” Anakin replied. ‘And you know,’ he said, turning to his mother, “I think I’ve been there before,” he said. “I think I may even have worked there at one time.”

Shmi nodded, unsure if she should tell him or let him remember on his own.

“There’s an urban legend about that shop, actually,” Anakin continued. “The locals say that the original owner was murdered right there in the shop. I guess sometimes people have nothing better to do than make up foolish stories.”

Cliegg frowned, not knowing that Anakin had lost his memory. “It’s not a foolish story,” he said. “You ought to know, Anakin.”

Anakin frowned. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“*You* killed the creature that owned the shop, remember? Watto?” he said.

Padmé and Shmi shot him a look of warning, but it was too late.

Anakin frowned as he digested this. “*I* killed him?” he said at last in a voice that bespoke his horror. “*I’m* the one that they’re talking about??”

Cliegg looked at his wife, perplexed by Anakin’s reaction.

“Anakin has suffered memory loss,” Shmi explained quietly.

Oh damn, Cliegg thought, feeling horrible that he’d been the one to drop such a bomb on the young man.

Anakin looked at Padmé. “Is it true?” he asked her quietly. “Did I kill the owner of that shop?”

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she replied, reaching her hand out to cover his. “I’m afraid it is true.”

Anakin felt a swell of anxiety rising within him. He’d heard the stories of how the toydarian had been slaughtered, of the blood stains that had taken days to remove. At the time he’d dismissed them as idle gossip, but now he knew better. Now he knew that the stories were true. And what was worst of all, he had been the author of those stories. Had he really be responsible for that carnage? What possible justification could there be for such violence?

“Why?” he asked finally. ‘Why did I do it?’ he looked at his wife, his mother, his step father each in turn. “Can anyone tell me why??”

“You did it out of revenge, Anakin,” Padmé told him quietly. “That’s why you killed Watto; to settle a score.”

Anakin looked at her, her words doing nothing to alleviate the sickening sense of guilt he felt. “To settle a score?” he asked. “What score?? What did he do to me that I would retaliate in such a manner??”

“It’s a long story, Anakin,” Shmi spoke up. “But one I suppose you’re going to have to be told.”

Anakin didn’t like what he was sensing from his mother, from Padmé. He looked at his wife, whose expression gave him little cause to take hope. Looking back at his mother, he braced himself for what she was about to tell him.

“Tell me, Mom,” he said to Shmi. “Tell me what happened. I need to know.”

Chapter 54

Chapter 54

Chapter 54

Padmé looked at her mother-in-law, wondering if she would take the initiative and begin the narrative. They each had their part in the story, a story which Anakin had to be told. Padmé had hoped that Anakin's own memories would have revealed this dark chapter in his life to him, but it seemed that was not to be. He needed answers, and he needed them now.

"You and I were slaves, Anakin," Shmi began. "You were born into slavery, I'm afraid. I was the property of Gardula the Hutt when you were born, and shortly after your fourth birthday we were sold to Watto. You had always shown an aptitude for building and fixing mechanical contrivances; it was uncanny, really. It was when you were four that you went missing," she continued, the memories of that terrible day still making her blood run cold. "You used to work in Watto's repair shop, and one day you just didn't come home. I only found out recently that you'd been kidnapped."

"Kidnapped by whom?" Anakin asked. "Why would anyone kidnap me? I was just a slave boy."

"There was always a great deal about you that was remarkable, Anakin," Shmi explained. "You demonstrated...abilities, unusual and powerful abilities that I didn't understand. I think it stemmed from the fact that you were conceived without a father. Even from then you were remarkable."

Anakin frowned. "I had no father?" he asked. "How is that possible?"

Shmi smiled. "I've wondered that for almost twenty years now," she said. "But I promise you, that's the truth. But these abilities were also the reason that you were taken from me. Somehow the men responsible knew that you were special, and they took you away, telling you that you had been sold, and that I'd allowed it to happen."

Anakin felt the anxiety starting to swell up within him as his mother continued her narrative. There was something else he was beginning to feel, something even more disturbing. He was starting to remember....

"Where is my mommy? Why can't I see her?"

"Your mother doesn't want you anymore, boy. I offered her money and she sold you to me like the slave you are."

"My mommy would never do that! She loves me!"

"There's no such thing as love. Lesson number one: no one loves you, no one cares. You must learn to rely only on yourself, for you're the only person who cares about you."

"If you don't care about me, why do you want me to come with you?"

Dooku patted the boy's head stiffly. "You are special, young Anakin Skywalker. One day you will be the most powerful man in the galaxy. I've come to take you to a great man, a man who will teach you everything you need to know."

"Will I ever see my mother again?"

"No. Forget you ever had a mother, boy. As far as she's concerned, you're dead. She has washed her hands of you, do you understand?"

"No," Anakin admitted, shaking his head woefully. But the white haired man offered no further explanation and simply left Anakin alone in the small cabin. He was cold, for it was cold in space. He was afraid, and missed his mother terribly. In his innocence he did not see that he was being lied to, that he was simply a pawn in the evil machinations of a master villain. All he knew was that he was cold, alone, and scared. "I miss you Mom," he said quietly to no one, trying his best to be brave. But it was hard to be brave when you were sadder than you'd ever been. Even the worst beating at the hands of Gardulla the Hutt hadn't hurt as much as this did...

"I remember that day," Anakin said slowly as the memories coalesced in his mind. "Count Dooku was the name of the man who kidnapped me, wasn't it?" he asked, looking at his mother.

"Yes," Shmi replied. "You remember him?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes," he replied quietly. 'I remember how scared I was, how sad I was thinking that you'd given me away.' He frowned. "Why did he do that? Who is he that he did that to me?"

"Dooku was the servant of the master villain in this story," Padmé put in. "Palpatine was the one who had you abducted, Anakin."

Anakin looked at her. "Isn't that the name of the man I killed?" he asked.

Padmé nodded. "Yes, that's right," she told him. "Palpatine was a monster, Anakin; he deserved to die for everything he put you through."

Anakin felt torn between wanting to know what Palpatine had done, and the comfort of not knowing anything. There was peace in ignorance, he was soon discovering. The more he learned about his past, the more uneasy he became. He looked at his wife, not knowing how to put into words what he was feeling; but he needn't have been concerned. She knew even without the need for words.

"I don't think it's a good idea for us to continue along this vein," she said, looking at Anakin with concern. "Too much information at once will be too much for you to deal with, Ani."

Anakin couldn't help but agree. "I think you're right," he said quietly, looking down at her hand in his. "I... I had no idea that any of this had happened, and I sense that there is so much more that I have yet to remember."

"Perhaps it ought to be left up to you to remember," Shmi suggested. "Rather than us telling you. Perhaps that would make things easier to assimilate."

Anakin nodded. “Yes, I... I think so,” he agreed. At the back of his mind, however, he was alarmed that this would even need to be suggested. What had happened to him that was so horrendous that it needed to be handled so delicately? He looked at his wife, so steadfast and strong in her support and her love; surely things could not be so bad if he had her in his life.

“Perhaps we ought to think about getting back to Coruscant,” Padmé suggested. “I think the sooner we get you back into the routine of your former life, the sooner your memory will come back to you.”

Anakin nodded, although he himself was unsure if he even wanted to regain his memory now. If the little he’d learned was any indication, his past had been a difficult one. And yet, there was no escaping it either.

“You only just got here,” Cliegg protested. “Your mother has waited a long time to spend time with you.”

Shmi was disappointed that they were planning on leaving so soon, but understood why they felt compelled to do so. She looked at Cliegg, sensing that he felt badly about his blunder, but annoyed with him nonetheless. She had only just been reunited with her only son, and now he was leaving, and it was because of Cliegg’s careless remark.

“I wish you didn’t have to leave so soon,” Shmi said at last. “But I can understand why you feel the way you do. Besides, this heat is no good for a woman in Padmé’s condition.”

“Why don’t you come with us?” Padmé suggested. ‘I know Anakin would love to spend more time with you,’ she said. “And so would I.”

Shmi looked at her son, sensing that there was a great deal going on in his mind and in his heart. Anakin had been denied his mother’s support and comfort for fifteen years; if there was ever a time he needed her, it was now.

“Thank you, Padmé,” Shmi replied at last. “I’d love to come with you.”

That afternoon, Anakin and Padmé returned to Mos Espa to say goodbye to their friends, while Shmi made preparations for her trip to Coruscant. Beru helped her pack a small bag as Cliegg watched from the doorway of their bedroom. He’d said very little since Anakin and Padmé had left, but Shmi could tell that he was upset about her leaving.

“You know, if someone had just told me that Anakin had lost his memory, none of this would have happened,” Cliegg grumbled.

Shmi looked up at him. “No one is blaming you, Cliegg,” she said. “Besides, Anakin needs to know about his past. We can’t hide it from him forever.”

“I suppose,” Cliegg replied. “Still... I feel just awful the way I told him. Poor kid. Did you see the look on his face??”

Shmi nodded with a sigh. “Yes, he was devastated. But he’s bound to learn of his past either from his own memories or from someone else. The fact that he reacted the way he did actually gives me hope.”

“What do you mean?” Beru ask

“Well, maybe, just maybe, that knock on the head has changed him,” Shmi said. “He has seemingly none of the darkness in him that fifteen years spend in servitude to that monster Palpatine created.”

“But he’ll remember all that,” Cliegg pointed out. “You said so yourself.”

“Yes, he will,” Shmi agreed. “But how will he react to knowing he did those things? With horror? Or with acceptance of what and who he is?”

“I suppose time will tell,” Beru put in. “He certainly does seem different than the last time he was here, doesn’t he?”

Shmi nodded. “Yes, very different,” she agreed. “He’s more like the Anakin I would have expected him to be a twenty, how he might have been had he not been stolen from me.”

“So maybe this accident was a good thing, then,” Cliegg remarked. “Is that what you’re getting at?”

“I’m not sure what I’m getting at,” Shmi told him with a smile. “I suppose I’m just hoping that the little boy I lost all those years ago is still alive inside of the man he has become. Maybe, at last, he’s come back to me, Cliegg.”

Cliegg exchanged a look with Beru and then looked back at his wife. “I hope so, hon,” he said with a smile. “I really do.”

By nightfall, Anakin, Padmé and Shmi were on their way to Coruscant. It was a long trip, and Padmé, who had been feeling poorly all day, had fallen asleep in the cabin. Shmi and Anakin were alone in the cockpit as the ship hurtled through hyperspace on its way to the capital.

“Padmé told me that you gave money to some slaves back in Mos Espa,” Shmi said. “That you enabled them to buy their freedom.”

Anakin nodded. “The boy was being abused by this creature at least four times his size. I had to do something.”

“You know when you were a small boy you used to tell me that one day, after you’d left and become a famous pilot, you’d return to Tatooine and free all the slaves,” Shmi told him with a smile.

Anakin smiled. “Well, I freed some of them,” he replied. He was thoughtful for a moment. ‘It was the right thing to do,’ he continued. “I just felt compelled to do it, I don’t know why. I think on some level I knew that I’d been like him once, a slave to a cruel master.” He frowned. “I was right as it turned out.”

Shmi sighed. “Ani, whatever you learn, remember that it is in the past,” she told him. “And that you have moved past that, you are no longer the person that killed Watto. You’ve changed a great deal since then.”

Anakin glanced at her. “You make it sound as though I was some sort of monster,” he said. He said nothing for a moment, hoping that she would refute his statement. But she didn’t. “Was I, Mom? Was I a monster?”

Shmi frowned. “You were a victim, Anakin,” she told him. “Anyone in your position would have been the same as you given the circumstances.”

His mother’s words didn’t do much to alleviate his sense of anxiety. “That doesn’t erase what I did,” he said quietly.

Shmi looked at him. He had a long road ahead of him both in recovering his memory and coming to terms with them. *But you won’t go through this alone, Anakin,* she thought resolutely. *You have me to help you, you have Padmé to help you, and together we will see you through this crisis.*

Anakin had heard his mother’s silent vow, as clearly as though she had spoken the words, and was moved by them. He reached over and took her hand. “I’m glad you came with us, Mom,” he said, giving her a smile.

Shmi returned his smile. “There’s no where else I belong right now, Ani,” she told him, “except with you. And I’m not going anywhere until I’ve seen you through this.”

Anakin nodded, and gave his mother’s hand a squeeze, comforted by her strong, reassuring presence.

Chapter 55

Chapter 55

Coruscant

"This is your home?" Shmi asked as Anakin pulled the cruiser into the private hangar beside the tall, imposing building that he and Padmé called home.

"Yes," he said, looking up at the building. 'I recognize it,' he said with a smile. "I guess that's a good thing."

Shmi nodded as she unstrapped herself. "Yes it is," she replied. "Will you wake up Padmé?"

"I'll try not to," Anakin responded as he stood up. He walked to the back of the ship where Padmé was sleeping. He sat on the side of the bed and watched her for a moment, not wishing to disturb her peaceful slumber. Bending to her, he planted a soft kiss on her cheek. She smiled in her sleep, and her eyes fluttered open.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't want to wake you up."

"It's okay," she said with a yawn. "Where are we?"

"Home," he told her. "We just arrived."

Padmé nodded. "Did it look familiar?"

"Yes it did," he replied. 'I'm getting my memory back, Padmé,' he assured her. "Slowly but surely."

"I knew you would," she said, framing his face with her hands.

He helped her up and then they left the cabin together. Shmi was waiting for them at the bottom of the ramp, and smiled when she saw Padmé.

"Did you have a good rest?" she asked.

Padmé nodded. "I didn't realize how tired I was," she commented.

"You always feel that way when you're expecting," Shmi replied. "At least in the beginning. You'll need a lot of pampering," she added, looking up at Anakin with a smile.

Anakin smiled and put an arm around his wife's shoulders. "Oh I'll make sure she gets plenty of that," he assured Shmi.

Arriving at the apartment a short time later, Anakin and Padmé were surprised to find Obi-Wan there with Dormé. Neither was surprised by their arrival, for Padmé had contacted Dormé to tell her to expect them and ready the guest room for Shmi.

"Welcome home, both of you!" Dormé said, giving Padmé a hug. She looked up at Anakin. "It's so good to see you, Anakin," she said.

Anakin smiled. “Thanks, Dormé,” he said. “It’s good to be home,” he added. As Padmé introduced Shmi to both Dormé and Obi-Wan, Anakin, looked around the apartment. He was pleased that it looked familiar to him, and was encouraged by the glimpses of memories jumped to his mind as he surveyed his surroundings. His eyes stopped when they lit on Obi-Wan, who seemed familiar to him, but whose name he couldn’t quite grasp.

“It’s good to see you, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said, walking towards him. “Dormé was kind enough to let me know that you were arriving tonight, and I wanted to come and welcome you home myself.”

Anakin nodded, studying the man’s face, desperate to remember him. Obi-Wan could sense that he was struggling, Padmé had let them know of Anakin’s condition, and so it came to no surprise to him. “I’m Obi-Wan Kenobi,” he said at last, giving Anakin a smile.

“I’m sorry,” Anakin said. “I know we are friends, but I just don’t remember you right now.”

“Don’t fret about it,” Obi-Wan replied. “I’m sure it will come back to you in time.”

“I hope so,” Anakin replied.

“Well, I should leave you good people to your rest,” Obi-Wan said. ‘It’s getting late. Again, welcome home to you both,’ he said. “And welcome to you, Mrs. Lars,” he added, bowing in Shmi’s direction.

Shmi wasn’t quite sure what to make of Obi-Wan’s gallantry and merely smiled in response.

While Anakin walked Obi-Wan to the lift, Padmé showed Shmi to the guest room, which Shmi was only too happy to see. It had been a long day, and she was more than ready for bed.

“Is there anything I can get for you before I retire, Milady?” Dormé asked.

“No, thank you Dormé,” Padmé replied as she sat down. “You can turn in for the night if you like.”

“I think I will then,” Dormé replied. “Goodnight, Milady.”

“Good night Dormé,” Padmé replied. Anakin soon joined her.

“Mom gone to bed?” he asked.

Padmé nodded. “Yes,” she said. “She was pretty tired.”

As Anakin sat on the sofa, an image of a man came to him. He was angry, and somehow his anger pleased Anakin.

Padmé could tell that he was remembering something, and simply watched him; waiting for him to tell her what was going through his mind.

“I remember sitting here,” he told her finally. ‘And there was a man here,’ he added, pointing across at the opposite couch. “He was very angry, but I don’t remember why.”

“That was Palo,” she told him.

Anakin looked at her. “Palo?” he asked with a frown. “Who’s he?”

"He was, at one time, my fiancé," she told him.

"Fiancé!" he cried. "Your *fiancé*?"

Padmé nodded.

"Maybe you ought to explain this to me," he suggested with a frown.

Padmé had hoped he wouldn't ask this of her, and hesitated for a moment. Her pause only made Anakin more anxious.

"Say something," he said.

"Palo and I had been friends since we were children," Padmé began at last. "And eventually we started dating, and became engaged."

"Did you love him?" Anakin asked.

"As a friend, yes," she replied. "At one time. But I never felt for him what I feel for you," she assured him. "Not even remotely."

Anakin smiled, and started to relax. "So is that what happened?" he asked her. "You fell in love with me and broke up with him?"

Padmé frowned slightly. "Well... not exactly."

Anakin remained silent, waiting for her to continue, almost afraid to hear her explanation.

"You and I met on Alderaan, at a social gathering," she continued. "I was there with Palo, and you and he had words when he bumped into you accidentally. And then later on you and I had a rather interesting conversation."

"Interesting how?"

"Let's just say you weren't exactly a gentleman," she told him.

"What did I say to you?" he asked anxiously.

Padmé sighed. "You were very arrogant, very rude," she said. "You told me that you had the ability to read minds, and that you'd read Palo's earlier and knew that all he wanted from me was to... to get me into his bed. But you used much more colorful language than that."

Padmé stopped, for the look on Anakin's face was grabbing at her heart. "You have to understand, Ani, you were not the same man then," she told him taking his hand. "You were Palpatine's servant, a Sith. You didn't know how else to act."

Anakin was silent as he digested this. He knew that he'd been a Sith, so that was not surprising. But he was still confused.

"So... how did we end up together if I was such an ass?" he asked. "I would imagine you'd want nothing to do with me after that."

"I didn't," she replied. "But you had other ideas."

Padmé went on to explain how Palo had gone to Palpatine's office to complain about Anakin, and how he'd overheard this. Anakin listened, trying to remember what she was relating.

"After that you came to my office," she continued. "You came to find Palo and kill him."

"Kill him?" Anakin asked incredulously. "For what?"

"You were angry that he'd insulted you," she explained. "And wanted revenge."

Anakin was horrified. "Are you saying that I killed this man too?" he asked quietly.

"No, you didn't kill Palo," she replied. "We struck a deal, you and me."

"What deal?" he asked warily.

Padmé lowered her eyes, wishing there was some way that she could lessen the blow of what she was about to tell him, but there was no way to do it. "I agreed to marry you in exchange for Palo's life," she said at last. "That's how we got engaged."

"I blackmailed you," he said quietly.

Padmé simply nodded.

They were both silent for a few moments, and then Anakin stood up and walked over to the large balcony. He folded his arms over his chest and stared out at the dark cityscape, his mind and his heart in turmoil.

Padmé joined him after a few moments, worried by his silence.

"Tell me something," he said, his eyes still focused on the night lights of the city. "How did you get pregnant, Padmé? Did I rape you? Did I force myself upon you?"

"No!" she cried at once, taking his arm. "No, of course not," she averred.

He looked down at her, his eyes troubled. "But you didn't love me when you married me," he said softly. "And I was a monster."

"Yes, that's true," she said. 'But we weren't married long before we fell in love,' she told him. "I could see that there was more to you than the image you projected. I promise you, I wanted you every bit as much as you wanted me when we finally consummated our marriage."

Anakin smiled. "Is that so?" he asked.

Padmé nodded. "Palpatine forbade us from having a physical relationship, but we didn't..."

"What do you mean, he forbade us??" Anakin asked. "Who was he that he could do that to us?"

"He was your master," she told him. "You obeyed his every command, Anakin. But once we admitted our feelings for one another, you stopped caring about those commands. We made love for the first time on Tatooine, in your mother's house."

Anakin nodded as the memories of that magical night came back to him. "I remember now," he said with a smile. "It was the first time for both of us," he added.

"That's right," she said. "And it was wonderful," she added.

Anakin took her face into his hands. "I'm sorry for what I put you through," he told her. "I don't know how you could possibly love me after all that."

"I told you," she said. "I could see beyond the arrogance, I knew that there was someone worth loving underneath it. And I was right."

"Angel," he said, pulling her into his arms. He kissed the top of her head. 'So, Senator,' he murmured into her hair, "are you telling me that you were the aggressor in the start of our physical relationship?"

"You might say so," she told him, looking up at him with a smile. "When we were on our honeymoon I shocked you by getting into the hot tub with you wearing nothing but a smile."

Anakin laughed. "I'm sure that got my attention," he said.

"Oh yes," she replied. "Undivided attention as a matter of fact."

Anakin nodded, her words starting to turn him on. "What else did you do to grab my attention?"

Padmé smiled. "Well....I went out to a nightclub with you without wearing any underwear," she told him.

Anakin looked down at her, as memories of that incredible evening started to flow back to him. "I remember that!" he told her. "I remember that you got angry at me for getting too fresh with you under the table."

Padmé laughed. "Yes, that's right!" she said. "And then you got angry, so I had to apologize to you. Do you remember how I did that?"

Anakin nodded as the smile spread over his face, the memory of their tryst in the elevator coming back to him and filling him with lust. "Oh yes, I remember," he said, pulling her close to him. "That was incredible," he said, kissing the top of her head.

"It was," she agreed. 'It was so dangerous, so....kinky,' she said with a smile. "That's what made it so exciting."

Anakin moved his hands down to the buttons of her blouse. "You mean, sort of like making love on an open balcony?" he said. "Under the open sky where anyone passing by could see?"

"Ani, we mustn't," she protested weakly. "Your mother is inside... what if she came out here?"

"I'd sense her coming," he told her.

"Under normal circumstances, yes," she agreed.

He looked down at her, sensing her uneasiness. "I suppose you have a point," he admitted. "Let's go inside," he said.

Padmé smiled. "Good idea," she said. He took her hand and led her to their bedroom.

Chapter 56

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Padmé awoke the next morning and rolled onto her side to look at Anakin. He looked so peaceful in his sleep, more peaceful than she'd ever seen him. *He's changed*, she reflected as she watched him sleep. *The darkness is gone... he is truly Anakin Skywalker again.* She thought back to the previous night with a smile. As changed as he was, his passion for her had not changed, for it was as intense as ever. And yet, hadn't his seduction of her been different? Darth Vader would surely not have stopped when she'd asked him to; he would have undoubtedly seduced her and they would have ended up making love on the balcony, regardless of the risks of being seen.

Padmé's reflections were interrupted when a wave of nausea washed over her, forcing her out of bed in a hurry. She ran into the fresher, shutting the door behind her.

Anakin awoke to the sound of the door and opened his eyes. Padmé was gone, but he could feel her nearby. *She's sick*, he realized, sensing the waves of nausea emanating from her in the next room. He sat up in bed, wondering if he ought to go and see if she was okay; but *she probably doesn't want me hanging around right now*, he reasoned. He got out of the bed and walked over to the door, and stood there hesitantly for a moment.

"Angel? You okay?" he called through the door.

There was no response and Anakin grew concerned. "Padmé?"

The door opened and Padmé emerged. "I'm okay," she told him.

Anakin frowned. "Are you sure?"

She smiled, and touched his face lightly. "Yes, I'm sure," she said. "This is all very natural, Ani, I promise you."

"For how long?" he asked as she put on a bath robe.

"Sola said she was sick for the first three months or so," she told him. "So it should pass soon, hopefully."

"Isn't there something you can take to alleviate it?" he asked as he slipped on his sleep pants.

"Yes, but I don't like to take meds unnecessarily," she told him.

Anakin frowned. "I'd say this qualifies as necessary," he responded.

"You worry too much," she told him. "Besides, it's only first thing in the morning. Once I have some food in my stomach I'm okay."

"Okay, if you insist," he replied. "Let's go have breakfast then."

“Good idea,” she replied.

Delicious smells emanated from the kitchen as Anakin and Padmé entered the dining area. Both were surprised to see Shmi emerge from the kitchen carrying a plate of delicious looking sticky buns.

“Good morning,” she said with a smile.

“Mom what are you doing?” Anakin asked as he pulled out a chair for Padmé. “Where’s Dormé?”

“She went to the market,” Shmi replied. “Besides, I thought it was fitting for me to prepare breakfast today, being a special day and all. I made all your favorites, Ani.”

“I suppose it is a special day,” Anakin agreed, looking at Padmé. “Being back home is pretty special.”

Shmi looked at him as she took a seat across from them. “Anakin today is your birthday,” she told him. “Your twentieth birthday. That’s what is so special about today.”

Padmé looked at Anakin in surprise. “Today is your birthday?” she asked.

“I suppose it is,” he replied. ‘I really had no idea,’ he added, looking back at his mother. “It’s been rather a long time since I’ve celebrated my birthday, actually,” he said.

Shmi’s heart ached as she imagined what her son’s previous fifteen birthdays must have been like living as a slave to Palpatine. She reached over and put her hand on his. “Well then we’ll just have to make sure we do this one up right then, won’t we?”

Anakin smiled. “I suppose we will,” he replied. He looked at his wife. ‘I certainly have a lot to celebrate,’ he added. “A beautiful wife, twins on the way,” he looked back at Shmi, “and my mother at my side once more. I’d say those are all good reasons to celebrate. Why don’t we go out to dinner tonight, the three of us?” he suggested.

“That’s a great idea,” Shmi said.

“Yes it is,” Padmé agreed. “But I just worry about the media. They’ve been hounding me for weeks now. I don’t imagine they’d care if it’s your birthday or not. We wouldn’t get any privacy.”

Anakin nodded. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said. ‘I saw them on the holonet hounding you,’ he told Padmé. “They were relentless.”

“And once they find out you’re back, they’ll likely be even worse,” Shmi said.

Padmé was thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe we ought to just answer their questions and get them off of our backs,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Shmi asked.

“A press conference,” Padmé replied. ‘That way we’d be in control, and they could ask their questions under our terms, not theirs.’ She looked at Anakin. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not so sure I’m ready for that, Padmé.”

"I'll be there with you," Padmé reminded him. "I'll even answer the questions if you like. Like it or not Ani the press will not let us be until they have been given answers."

Anakin sighed, realizing she was right. "I suppose there's no getting around this, is there?" he said.

"I'm afraid not," Padmé replied. "The sooner we give them what they want, the sooner we can get on with our lives."

"How soon can you arrange this?" Shmi asked.

"I can arrange one for this morning," Padmé replied. "That is, if you're ready," she said to Anakin.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be ready," he grumbled. "But we might as well get it over with. Make the arrangements for this morning, Padmé."

"I'll contact Jar Jar right after breakfast," Padmé said. 'Right now I need to eat,' she added. "And this feast looks wonderful," she told her mother-in-law with a smile. "Thank you so much for this."

Shmi smiled. "I haven't cooked for Ani in a long time," she said. "It was my pleasure. Now eat before this gets cold."

Senate Building

Reporters and assorted media personnel were gathered in the press room, waiting anxiously for the press conference to begin. Everyone was jockeying for position, anxious to be the one to ask the questions that were on the minds of everyone in the Republic.

Finally a pair of security guards entered the room and took up their positions on either end of the small dais that stood at the front of the room. This quieted everyone down, and the reporters took their seats in anticipation of the arrival of Senator Amidala. But when they saw not only the senator but also Darth Vader enter the room, the crowd erupted into applause and shouts of surprise, accompanied by the flashes of holocameras.

Padmé looked up at Anakin, who seemed very uneasy with all the attention. She took his hand as they waited for the crowd to quiet down once more. As soon as they had done so, Padmé spoke up.

"You have been invited here to ask the questions that you've all been wondering about for weeks now," Padmé began. 'But before we begin, you must bear in mind that my husband has suffered a serious head injury, and his memory is still not complete,' she added. A murmur of surprise rippled through the crowd at this. "Shall we begin?"

"Lord Vader, how did you get injured?" one reporter asked.

Anakin glanced at his wife before responding. "First of all, I would ask that you use my real name, Anakin Skywalker," he began. "The name Darth Vader has no meaning for me."

This surprised the reporters, who took note of this as they awaited his response to the question.

“As for the injury, it happened when I crash landed on Tatooine,” Anakin continued. “I’m still not sure what happened, but judging by the wreck, it was a pretty significant crash. When I awoke I had no memory of anything, not even my own name.”

“How did you survive? Who found you?”

“I was found by moisture farmers outside of Wayfare,” Anakin told them. “They nursed me back to health, and helped me find employment in Mos Espa.”

“When did you remember who you are?”

“I only did so when I saw myself on the news, ironically enough,” Anakin replied. “That was the first time I remembered the name Anakin Skywalker. I actually remembered my wife’s name before my own,” he added, looking at Padmé.

“Lord... uh... Skywalker, you fled Coruscant after assassinating Chancellor Palpatine,” one reporter said. “Do you have any memory of that afternoon?”

“Yes, for the most part,” Anakin replied, somewhat uneasily.

“Do you remember why you killed him?”

Anakin looked at his wife, unnerved by the question.

“Do you want me to field this one?” she asked quietly.

Anakin shook his head. “No, I need to do it,” he replied. He turned back to the reporters once more. ‘I had many reasons for wanting to kill Palpatine,’ he said. “Although when I went to the Senate that afternoon, that was not my intention. I meant to confront him, for he had threatened my wife and family, and had plans to destroy the Jedi. However, he provoked me, which I admit readily. He threatened to take my children from me, and that was the last straw.”

“Are you saying that you and Senator Amidala are expecting?” one reporter called out.

Anakin looked at Padmé once more. She merely smiled at him.

“Yes, we’re expecting twins,” he told them.

“So what are your plans now?” one reporter called out. “Will you join the Jedi?”

Anakin hesitated for a moment before replying. “I... I haven’t decided about that,” he said. “They have made no offers to me, so perhaps it is a non issue.”

“What will you do if you don’t join the Jedi?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Anakin replied. “My first priority is to regain my memory. Once that happens... I’m not quite sure what my destiny will be.”

“Is it true that you raced and won a pod race on Tatooine?”

Anakin smiled. “Yes, it’s true,” he said.

The press asked a few more questions before the press official wrapped things up. By this point Anakin was only too happy to leave the room, having found the entire experience more than a little unnerving.

"I'm glad that's over," Anakin said as he and Padmé stepped into the lift.

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You were wonderful," she said.

"You think so?" he asked, looking down at her.

She nodded. "Absolutely," she said.

He smiled, and took her face in his hands. "I couldn't have done it without you at my side, Angel," he told her, kissing the top of her head. "What do you say we go get Mom and get some lunch?" he asked.

"That's a splendid idea," she said. "We're starved."

Anakin and Padmé had stepped off the lift and were on their way to the hangar bay when they encountered Mace Windu.

"Hello Master Windu," Padmé said with a smile. "What brings you to the Senate this morning?"

"I was here for the press conference you held," Windu replied. He looked at Anakin. "You handled yourself very well, Anakin."

"Thank you, Master," Anakin replied. He was surprised that the Jedi had sent a representative to the conference, but said nothing for the moment.

"We'd like to speak with you, Anakin," Windu continued. "The Council has a lot to discuss with you."

Padmé looked up at Anakin, who seemed as surprised as he by Windu's statement.

"Of course," Anakin said. "I'd be happy to come by. When would you like me to?"

"Today if possible," Windu replied.

"We're just on our way to lunch," Anakin replied. "Is this afternoon okay?"

"Fine, just fine," Windu replied. He couldn't help but notice how much more agreeable Anakin was now. Obi-Wan had mentioned sensing a change in him the previous night, and Windu was beginning to see what he meant. 'I'll see you then,' he continued. "Enjoy your lunch," he added, looking at Padmé.

"Thank you," she replied.

Windu nodded to her respectfully, and then turned to leave. He remembered something, and turned back. "Oh, and congratulations on the twins," he said with a smile. "That's fantastic news."

Anakin and Padmé looked at one another with a smile. "Yes, we think so too," Anakin said. "Thank you, Master Windu."

Windu walked away at this point, and Padmé and Anakin continued on their way. Anakin was quiet as they found their way to their speeder.

"I wonder what the Jedi Council wants with me," he mused as he opened the door for his wife.

“I think I know,” Padmé replied as she climbed into the speeder. “They’re going to ask you to become a Jedi.”

Anakin said nothing as he climbed in beside her. “I’m not sure I want to be a Jedi,” he told her.

Padmé looked up at him. “You’re the only one who can make that decision, Anakin,” she said.

Anakin nodded. “I know,” he said, starting up the speeder. “I just hope they see it that way,” he added as he lifted the vehicle into the air.

Padmé silently hoped the same thing.

Chapter 57

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Shmi and Padmé couldn't help but notice how quiet Anakin was during lunch. Both knew what was on his mind: the upcoming meeting with the Jedi Council.

Shmi remembered when Anakin was a small boy, how he longed to be a Jedi Knight one day. It had been a dream of his at one point in his life, but his life had changed so much since those days. Was it any wonder he was confused now about the direction of his life?

"I'd like you both to come with me to this meeting," Anakin said at last as the serving droid started to clear their table.

Padmé and Shmi exchanged a look of surprise.

"Are you sure it will be permitted?" Shmi asked. "I understand the Jedi are rather strict."

"If they want to speak with Anakin then they'll have to permit it," Padmé stated. "I'm not going anywhere," she added, looking at Anakin.

Shmi nodded, pleased by her daughter-in-law's devotion. "Then neither am I," she said. "We'll face the Jedi together," she said.

Anakin nodded, buoyed by their support. He looked at his wrist chrono. "Looks like it's time to get over there," he said. "They'll be waiting."

The Jedi Council was indeed waiting, the atmosphere among them expectant and uncertain.

"Changed he has, there is no doubt," Yoda declared. "But has the Dark Side left him completely?"

"When I saw him briefly at his home last night I sensed no Darkness," Obi-Wan stated. "But of course, I was only there for a short time," he added.

"He claims to have lost his memory," Mace Windu spoke up. "And that it is slowly coming back to him."

"Then he may have no memory of the Darkness, no memory of being a Sith," Ki-Adi Mundi said. "What will happen when he does regain those memories?"

No one could answer this question, but they didn't need to concern themselves, for it was at this point that Anakin was announced by a young padawan.

"Let him in," Windu said.

The padawan bowed, respectfully and then left the room once more. A moment later, Anakin Skywalker entered the room, accompanied by his wife and a middle-aged woman only Obi-Wan recognized as Anakin's mother.

“Welcome Anakin,” Yoda said. “And welcome to you as well, Senator.” He looked at Shmi questioningly.

“Thank you Master Yoda,” Anakin replied. He turned to his mother. “May I present my mother, Shmi Skywalker Lars.”

The Jedi were surprised by Shmi’s unexpected presence but were intrigued nonetheless.

“Welcome, Shmi,” Windu said. “Please sit,” he said, indicating three chairs that had been vacated for the guests.

“We’ve asked you here today to thank you, Anakin,” Obi-Wan began, surprising Anakin with his statement. “You have saved the Jedi Order from its own short-sightedness, and we shall forever be in your debt.”

At this the other members of the Council rose to their feet and applauded.

Anakin was too stunned to say anything, and merely looked at his wife. She smiled and reached over and took his hand.

“There is, of course, more to this meeting than our expression of gratitude,” Mace Windu said as the Jedi took their seats again. “And I suspect you know the true reason behind our invitation,” he continued.

“I have some idea,” Anakin admitted.

“Your abilities are remarkable,” Mace Windu said. “Your midi-chlorian count higher than any being ever tested,” he continued.

“Yes, that’s true,” Anakin replied.

“Believe we do that your destiny is to be a Jedi, Anakin,” Yoda said. “A Jedi you would have been had Palpatine not stolen you from your mother.”

“How do you know that?” Anakin asked. “I was living on a remote planet on the Outer Rim. What were the chances I would have become a Jedi under such circumstances?”

“The Force works in mysterious ways, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said.

“Yes and the Dark Side of it lead Palpatine to Tatooine to steal Anakin from his mother,” Padmé put in, much to the shock of the Jedi.

The Jedi looked at one another, somewhat surprised by Anakin’s reticence.

“Is it not your wish to become a Jedi?” Ki-Adi asked at this point.

“No, it is not,” Anakin said. Sensing their shock, he continued. ‘I am...flattered that you would offer me a place among your ranks, truly I am,’ he said, “but the truth of the matter is, I don’t see how I can possibly fit into your rigid code. I have a wife, and soon I will have children. That goes against your code, doesn’t it?”

“Yes it does,” Windu said. “But that doesn’t mean that we wouldn’t make an exception for you, Anakin.”

“Would you?” Anakin asked. ‘Would you also make an exception for my children? I know that the Jedi are in the habit of taking Force sensitive infants from their parents; in fact, you

have a law giving you the right to do that, don't you?'
"Well, it isn't so much a law as a tradition," Ki-Adi said.

"Tradition or no tradition, no one is taking our children from us," Padmé spoke up.

"No one has said that, Senator," Windu replied calmly.

"Perhaps no one has said it, but I'm sure it's all crossed your minds what powerful Jedi Anakin's children would make," Padmé countered.

"No one is disputing that," Obi-Wan said. 'But these are unusual circumstances,' he continued. "No Jedi has ever fathered children. This is a completely unprecedented situation."

"Then perhaps a new set of traditions ought to be established," Shmi suggested. "You've admitted yourselves that it was your own shortsightedness that so nearly resulted in the destruction of the Jedi Order. Perhaps this is a sign that change is required."

Obi-Wan smiled, admiring Shmi tremendously. "I couldn't agree more, Mrs. Lars," he said.

"All this aside, we still haven't dealt with the issue of Anakin's decision," Ki-Adi said. "You are the Chosen One, Anakin. Your destiny is to be a Jedi. You cannot escape this destiny."

Anakin frowned. "What makes you think I'm this Chosen One you speak of?" he asked. "Some microscopic organisms in my blood? What makes you think that singles me out as the Chosen One? I was a Sith not that long ago, remember? Is that part of the prophecy?"

"To destroy the Sith, the destiny of the Chosen One it is," Yoda stated. "Destroyed the Sith you have, Anakin. Why resist you this destiny?"

Anakin sighed, and looked down at his wife's hand in his own. "I'm not sure why," he said quietly. "Perhaps part of it is my uncertainty about myself. There are still large portions of my life I don't remember, and I'm not even sure what remembering them will do to me."

"What do you mean, Anakin?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin looked up at him. "What if the Dark Side claims me again once I remember my life as a Sith?" he said, the fear evident in his eyes. "How can I be your Chosen One if deep down inside the Dark Side still resides within me?"

The Jedi were silent at this, and looked at one another uneasily. This was their own fear as well, for it had not been so very long since Anakin was Darth Vader, a Sith through and through. Was the change in him only temporary until he regained his memories?

"I don't believe that for a moment," Padmé spoke up. "I have seen the change in you, Anakin, and I think I can safely say that I know you better than anyone. Even before you'd lost your memory, you were not the same man I married. You had already rejected the Dark Side and the teachings of the Sith. That journey was only delayed by your accident, but once your memory returns, I am certain that you will resume it. The Darkness will *not* claim you again, Anakin. I have no doubt of that."

Padmé's declaration moved Anakin, and he gave her hand a squeeze.

“Perhaps there is a way that we can help you regain those memories,” Obi-Wan suggested.

“What are you talking about?” Anakin asked.

“I mean intensive meditation,” Obi-Wan replied. “A deep examination of your subconscious that will, hopefully, unlock the parts of your mind that are still closed off from your conscious mind,” Obi-Wan said.

“Sounds more like hypnosis,” Padmé commented.

“Not at all,” Obi-Wan replied. “There is no manipulation of the mind, only a deepening of awareness. I don’t imagine you were taught proper meditation techniques while under the tutelage of Palpatine, were you?” he asked Anakin.

“Not that I can remember,” Anakin replied.

“Do you really think that would work on Anakin?” Padmé asked doubtfully.

“That depends on him,” Obi-Wan replied, looking at Anakin. “If he is open to it, if he believes it can work, then yes, it will.”

Shmi spoke up at this point. “I understand the importance of Anakin regaining his memory,” she said. “But isn’t there a danger of forcing him to remember everything all at once? He’s been remembering on his own for weeks now; shouldn’t we just allow him to continue to do so?”

The Jedi looked at one another, unsure how to respond to this question.

“I think I understand,” Padmé said. ‘You have your own agenda where Anakin is concerned,’ she said, addressing the Jedi. “And haven’t got the patience to wait for him to recover his memory in his own way, you want to force it out of him so you can determine if he truly is your Chosen One. Isn’t that right?”

“Senator, you don’t understand,” Windu spoke up. “If Anakin is indeed the Chosen One, then he needs to be trained, he needs to...”

“He needs to be left alone,” Padmé interjected. “He has been a slave to others his entire life. This is the first time in his life when he is free; free to make decisions for himself, to determine his own destiny. I don’t care about your Jedi prophecies. If it means jeopardizing Anakin’s well being, I simply refuse to condone this course of action.”

Anakin had to restrain himself from smiling at this point at his wife’s protectiveness. Between Padmé and his mother, he’d barely had a chance to say anything. But at this point he spoke up.

“Look, I don’t want to sound ungrateful,” Anakin said. “But right now I have other things that I feel I need to do. Being a Jedi isn’t something I have thought about in a very long time, not since I was a small boy. I’m not saying that I will never be interested in being a Jedi, but right now I have other priorities.”

“Force you we cannot,” Yoda said, the disappointment clear in his voice. “Your decision it must be, Anakin.”

“Yes, of course,” Obi-Wan agreed, himself greatly disappointed by Anakin’s reaction. ‘I’m curious, Anakin,’ he continued, “what is it you feel you need to do? Is it something we could help you with?”

Anakin was thoughtful for a moment, and then nodded. “Yes, actually you could,” he said. “This is what I want to do...”

Chapter 58

Chapter 58

"Tatooine is a planet in dire need of intervention," Anakin told them. "The poverty is appalling, the slavery rampant. They are governed by gangsters, the Hutts, whose only concern is who they can exploit next in order to make money."

"As tragic as the situation is, what do you expect us to do about it?" Ki-Adi Mundi asked.

"I want the Republic to bring Tatooine under its auspices," Anakin said. "I want it to be under the protection of the Jedi. The people of Tatooine deserve better. They are good, hard working people who are being ruthlessly exploited by a handful of beings who rule with fear, greed and cruelty. There are slaves there who have never known anything in their lives but poverty and deprivation. Is that any way to live? Is it fair that people on this world and so many others enjoy such privileges while the people of Tatooine have none?"

The Jedi were silent, each one surprised by the passion with which Anakin had spoken. He certainly did not sound like the arrogant young man who had been appointed to the Council as the chancellor's representative. No Sith would care as much about the plight of the downtrodden.

Padmé, who was hearing this for the first time as well, was moved to silence by Anakin's words. She had always been a champion of the oppressed; the fact that her husband now shared her passion excited her.

"No, it isn't fair," Padmé said finally. "And I for one think your desire to help Tatooine is a noble one. I'm certain that we can get the Senate to consider your proposal, Ani. You can count on my support in your crusade."

Anakin smiled at his wife. "Thank you, Angel," he said, bringing her hand to his mouth and kissing it. "I know your support will go a long way."

"You'll have my support as well, Anakin," Obi-Wan spoke up. "In whatever capacity you need it."

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan, as glimpses of the past jumped to his mind. He remembered being on a mission with him, and saving his life from attacking droids.

"Well it's the least you can do after I saved your life," Anakin remarked with a smile.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Ah, your memory *is* returning I see," he quipped.

"You'd better believe it," Anakin replied.

Obi-Wan chuckled.

"Just what is it you want us to do?" Mace Windu asked. "This is not a governing body, Anakin."

"I know that," Anakin replied. "What I need of you is to help me free the slaves from their bondage and remove the Hutts from a position of power. I want you to extend your guardianship to the people of Tatooine and end their exploitation. I want you to help me convince the Senate to establish a just and equitable system of government that will benefit all the people of Tatooine, not just the privileged few."

"That's rather a daunting task, wouldn't you say?" Ki-Adi remarked.

"No more daunting than turning from the Dark Side and starting life anew," Anakin countered. "I'm doing just that, Master Mundi. Surely the Jedi are up to an equally challenging task."

Obi-Wan smiled, and looked over at Yoda, who up until now had remained silent. Indeed, each of the Jedi waited expectantly to hear what the ancient master had to say, for his wisdom was respected above anyone else's.

"Admirable your sense of justice is," Yoda said at last. 'And truly the mark of a penitent heart. Help you we will,' he continued. "Help him we must," he added, looking at his comrades.

Anakin felt a great sense of relief having procured the support of the Jedi. Surely with them on his side they would see changes brought about that would bring sweeping reforms to Tatooine.

"Ironically the creation of the clone army has turned out to be a blessing in disguise," Obi-Wan commented. "They will be invaluable in curbing the lawlessness of that planet."

"My thinking exactly," Anakin replied. 'But before we can do anything, we need the Senate to sanction this,' he said. He looked at his wife. "You're good friends with the new chancellors, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "Both Mon Mothma and Bail Organa have a strong sense of justice. I'm sure they will be open to this proposal, Anakin."

"In that case, I suggest a meeting with the chancellors be arranged as soon as possible," Mace Windu said. "Can we count on you to see to that, Senator?" he asked Padmé.

Padmé smiled. "Yes, most definitely," she replied. She looked at Anakin. "I will contact them at once."

"Great," Anakin said. He stood up, joined by his wife and mother. 'Thank you,' he said to the Jedi. "I'm very grateful for your support."

"We'll let you know when the meeting is," Padmé said. "It would be helpful if a representative of this council was present," she added.

"Of course," Windu said. "We'll be happy to attend," he added, looking at Yoda who nodded in agreement.

Anakin turned to his wife and mother with a smile, and, taking Padmé's hand, left with them.

"Anakin, I'm so proud of you," Shmi said as they walked through the enormous corridors of the temple. "You didn't say anything about this plan of yours."

“No,” Anakin replied. “But I’ve been thinking about this since I left Tatooine, since I saw that young boy being abused by his owner. I just hope the Senate is as open to the idea as the Jedi were.”

“They will be, Ani,” Padmé assured him. “I promise you.”

“Are you sure you want to stay home tonight, Ani? It’s your birthday after all,” Padmé asked as the three of them sat in the living area of the apartment.

“Yes,” Anakin replied. “That is if you Dormé doesn’t mind cooking,” he added.

“It’s Dormé’s day off,” Padmé told him. “But I think Shmi and I can manage,” she added with a smile.

As Padmé and Shmi went into the kitchen to decide upon dinner, the intercom from the lobby of the building was heard. Anakin walked over to the screen to see who it was, and was surprised to see Obi-Wan Kenobi.

“Hello Anakin,” Obi-Wan said. “I hope you don’t mind me dropping in like this.”

“Not at all,” Anakin replied. “Come on up.”

Anakin had been intrigued by Obi-Wan’s plan to help him regain his memories, although he’d not said so at the time. It was clear that his mother and wife were against the idea, but Anakin was beginning to grow impatient. He knew that his memory was coming back, but it was coming so slowly that it was agony. He knew that there were some memories that would be difficult to face; no doubt many of them would be painful. But he couldn’t ignore them; he had to face his past, no matter what.

The lift arrived and the door opened to reveal Obi-Wan Kenobi.

“Hello there,” he said as he stepped into the apartment. “I hope I’m not intruding on anything,” he said.

“Not at all,” Anakin replied. “Come on in.”

Obi-Wan followed Anakin into the apartment, looking around briefly as he did so. “Padmé is not home?” he asked.

“She’s making dinner with my mother,” Anakin told him as they sat down.

“I thought you said I wasn’t intruding,” Obi-Wan said.

“You’re not,” Anakin replied. “In fact, why don’t you stay for dinner? It’s my birthday, you know,” he said with a smile.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Well happy birthday,” he said. “How old are you if I may ask?”

“Twenty,” Shmi said as she entered the room with plates and cutlery.

Obi-Wan stood up at once. “Good evening Mrs. Lars,” he said, ever the gentleman.

Shmi smiled. “Hello,” she said as she started to set the table. “Please sit down, and please call me Shmi.”

Obi-Wan smiled. "Very well," he said. "Your son has just invited me to stay for dinner. I hope that's acceptable."

"It's perfectly acceptable," Shmi replied. "You can help us celebrate."

"I'd be most happy to do so," he told her.

"Good," Shmi replied. "I'll set another place," she added as she returned to the kitchen.

"So what brings you by?" Anakin asked. "I know you didn't come just to wish me a happy birthday," he added.

"No," Obi-Wan replied. 'I didn't. I just wanted to let you know how impressed I was earlier,' he said. "You handled yourself as well as the Council quite admirably, Anakin. I think you really surprised them."

"That wasn't my intention," Anakin admitted. "But if he helped get their attention, then I'm glad I did."

Obi-Wan nodded thoughtfully. "Well you certainly did that," he replied.

"I'm actually glad you decided to drop by," Anakin told him. "I wanted to talk to you about something you said earlier."

"Oh? What was that?" Obi-Wan asked.

"You said you could help me regain my memory," Anakin said.

"Yes," Obi-Wan replied. "I said I could try. But I had the impression that your wife and mother were very much against the idea."

"Yes, they are," Anakin replied. "But I'm not."

Obi-Wan was surprised by this, but let Anakin continue.

"I'm tired of the uncertainty, Obi-Wan," Anakin continued. "I know there are things in my past that won't be easy to face, but I need to face them, I can't avoid them. I want to regain those memories, I want to be whole. Can you help me to do that?"

Obi-Wan was silent for a moment as he considered this. "Have you spoken to Padmé about this?" he asked.

"No," Anakin replied. "But it's my decision, Obi-Wan, and I'm sure she'd agree."

"Yes, I'm sure she would too," Obi-Wan replied. "But I still think you ought to let her know what it is you intend to do. You don't know what the fall out of this could be. Padmé needs to be prepared."

"What do I need to be prepared for?"

Both men looked behind them to see Padmé, who'd heard the last part of their conversation.

"What are you two talking about?" she asked, looking from one to the other.

"I want Obi-Wan to help me regain the rest of my memory," Anakin told her.

Padmé frowned. “Anakin, I thought you’d agreed to let your memory return gradually as it has been.”

“I was willing to accept that if that was the only way,” Anakin told her. “But if there is a way to regain all of my memory, I want to try.”

“Ani, I don’t know,” she said doubtfully.

“Not knowing what happened in my past is driving me mad, Padmé,” Anakin continued. “I need to move on with my life, and I don’t feel that I can do that so long as there are gaps in my memory. I know it won’t be easy, but I have you and Mom, and I know whatever happens you’re both strong enough to face it with me. Can’t you see how important this is to me, Padmé?”

The frown didn’t leave Padmé’s face as she turned her eyes to Obi-Wan, silently cursing him for bringing the idea to Anakin’s attention. Obi-Wan could sense her resentment, and averted his eyes, feeling very uncomfortable all of a sudden.

“It’s your decision, Anakin,” she said at last. “I only hope you don’t regret it,” she added.

“If I do, I’ll have no one to blame but myself,” Anakin replied.

Padmé nodded. “Dinner is almost ready,” she told them. “So whatever it is you’re going to do, do it later.”

Anakin waited until she’d returned to the kitchen before he looked back at Obi-Wan. “She’s not happy about this,” he said.

“No, quite clearly she isn’t,” Obi-Wan agreed. “Are you sure about this?”

Anakin nodded. “I’m sure,” he said.

“Very well,” Obi-Wan said, standing up as he saw Shmi and Padmé reenter the room. “We’ll do it.”

Chapter 59

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Everyone did their best to enjoy dinner, but there was a definite feeling of tension in the air throughout the meal.

Anakin knew that both his wife and his mother disapproved of his choice, but he held firm in his decision. Obi-Wan felt more than a little awkward having been the one to bring the idea to Anakin's attention in the first place. And yet, neither of the women who loved Anakin were about to allow his birthday dinner to be ruined by bad feelings, and did their best to keep the conversation light and pleasant. However, once dinner was finished, and the household droid began to clear the dishes, it was impossible to avoid the topic any longer.

"Well? Shall we get started?" Anakin asked Obi-Wan at last.

Obi-Wan nodded. "As you wish," he said. "Perhaps where we were sitting earlier would be a good place."

Anakin stood up and looked over at his wife and mother. "I know both of you are against this," he told them. "But it would mean a lot to me if you were with me right now."

"Of course," Padmé replied. "Just because we don't like it doesn't mean we won't support you in it."

"Absolutely," Shmi agreed. She stood up, and was joined by Padmé. "We said we'd stand by you, Anakin, and we meant it."

Anakin nodded. "Thanks," he said. "That means a lot."

The four of them walked into the living room. Anakin sat down on one sofa, with Padmé sitting beside him, while Obi-Wan and Shmi sat across from them.

"Meditation is an ancient art practiced by the Jedi," Obi-Wan began. "It helps us in a myriad of ways. It enables us to channel the Force more effectively by helping us to clear our mind of any outside distractions. Through this oneness with the Force, we are able to see other places, both future and past. It is the past that we will focus on, Anakin, your past."

Anakin nodded. "I understand," he said. He looked at Padmé, whose face was a picture of apprehension. Clearly she knew already what Anakin was about to remember. This only made Anakin more determined to do so. "I'm ready," he said, looking back at Obi-Wan.

"Very well," Obi-Wan began. 'Perhaps we could begin with some simple breathing exercises,' he suggested. "Breath in through your nose, and out through your mouth," he told Anakin. "Take deep, steady breaths, trying to fill your lungs fully with each breath."

Anakin did as he was instructed, closing his eyes to focus on the task.

"Now, try to relax as you feel your body releasing the air," Obi-Wan said. "With each breath I want you to feel more relaxed."

This was challenging for Anakin, for there was a great sense of apprehension in what he was about to do. He could feel his wife's tension, as well as his mother's, and this did not make it easy for him to relax. Padmé could see that he was having difficulty and she took his hand. Anakin gave her hand a squeeze to let her know that he appreciated her gesture.

After a few minutes, Obi-Wan spoke again. "Now, I want you to imagine yourself alone, in a place where you feel totally safe, and totally at ease. You have nothing pressing to do; no one is there to distract you. I want you to clear your mind of questions, and allow the Force to fill you with a sense of well being and comfort."

Anakin made a conscious effort to relax his body and clear his mind, finding it surprisingly difficult to do both at once. Palpatine had never bothered to teach him the techniques of meditation, perhaps because he didn't trust Anakin enough to show him a way to augment his own tremendous powers.

"Now that are safe and relaxed, I want you to allow your mind to travel back in time," Obi-Wan continued. "I want you to go back to the day you were taken from Tatooine," he said.

Anakin nodded in understanding, a slight frown creasing his brow. He remembered that day, and was not anxious to revisit it.

Boy! Come here! Come in here boy!

I run into the shop, wondering what it is my master wants. There's a man in the shop, a very tall man with white hair and a beard. I don't know who he is, but he gives me a bad feeling. I know somehow he's a bad man.

About time you got here! Watto grumbles at me. This is Count Dooku, he's your new owner.

I looked up at the man, my fear getting worse. You bought me? I ask him.

Yes, young Skywalker, he says with a smile that I know is fake. You're coming with me now.

What about my mother? I can't leave her, she'll be so worried!

Your mother has agreed to this, the count tells me. She will be given enough money that she will be able to make a good life for herself. You don't need to worry about her.

I don't believe him, my mother would never sell me! She would never do this to me!

Come, boy, Dooku says, grabbing my hand. His skin is rough and cold, almost like he's been dead for a long time. I want to pull away, but I know that would only get me into trouble. I look back at Watto, but he is too busy counting his money to pay me any attention.

Obi-Wan could sense Anakin's anguish as he recalled what had transpired on that day. But he knew that things were only going to get worse.

Padmé was not Force sensitive, but she too knew that Anakin was remembering. She gave his hand a squeeze, not knowing what else she could do at this point to show him that she supported him.

We're in a ship now. I've never been in space, but I'm not excited to be. I'm scared, and I want my mommy. The man who owns me now comes into the place where I am now and starts

looking at some data discs.

Where is my mommy? Why can't I see her? I ask him.

Your mother doesn't want you anymore, boy, he tells me. I offered her money and she sold you to me like the slave you are.

He makes me mad when he talks like this. My mommy would never do that! I shout, trying not to cry. She loves me!

There's no such thing as love, the count tells me. Lesson number one: no one loves you, no one cares. You must learn to rely only on yourself, for you're the only person who cares about you.

I don't believe what he says, and get confused. If you don't care about me, why do you want me to come with you? I ask him.

He pats my head, like he's afraid to touch me. You are special, young Anakin Skywalker. One day you will be the most powerful man in the galaxy. I've come to take you to a great man, a man who will teach you everything you need to know.

I still don't understand, but I don't ask him any questions. He'll only get mad at me again. Will I ever see my mother again? I ask him instead.

He gives me a really dirty look. No, he tells me. Forget you ever had a mother, boy. As far as she's concerned, you're dead. She has washed her hands of you, do you understand?

No, I tell him, shaking my head. . But he tells me nothing, and then walks away, leaving me alone in the small cabin. It's cold, I never knew it was so cold in space. I'm scared, I miss my mommy, and I can't understand why she would do this to me. I miss you Mom, I say quietly to no one, trying hard to be brave. But it's hard to be brave when you're sadder than you'd ever been. Even the worst beating at the hands of Gardulla the Hutt didn't hurt as much as this did...

Although Obi-Wan did not know the particulars of what Anakin was reliving, the emotions that emanated from him were startling in their intensity.

Memories of his childhood, or what was supposed to be childhood, flooded into Anakin's mind, unstoppable, coming at him one after the other. He relived the beatings, the neglect, the endless nights of terror and loneliness as his apprenticeship under Palpatine slowly turned him into someone different. He remembered as the anger and fear gradually became so much a part of who he was that he stopped being Anakin Skywalker completely, and took on the persona of another, of a dark, vicious version of himself, the persona of Darth Vader.

Count Dooku emerges from Master Sidious' private office looking shaken and pale, even more pale than usual. I am pleased by the fear I feel emanating from him and fold my arms as I watch him.

Something wrong? I ask him.

Dooku looks at me, unable to hide the hatred in his eyes. Keep your smart mouthed remarks to yourself, Vader, he retorts.

I laugh. Surely you knew this day would come, Dooku, I tell him, enjoying the moment immensely. After all, there are only two Sith. You taught me that yourself. And now that I'm a man, I'm the logical choice to replace you.

You're seventeen, Vader, Dooku snaps. Hardly a man. And what makes you think Master Sidious is ready to replace me? Especially with the likes of you?

I simply smile in response. He knows as well as I do that his days are numbered. Lord Sidious is sending me to Kamino, and I believe this is my test to prove myself worthy of being his apprentice. And if I pass, when I pass, Dooku will be killed. I hope my master lets me do it...

The expression on Anakin's face as he recalled this dark episode in his life made Padmé grow fearful. She looked at Obi-Wan, not saying anything but speaking volumes with her eyes. Obi-Wan could see how upset she was, but simply shook his head. Any distraction would be deleterious to Anakin's progress, and he'd already come so far.

Kamino is a strange planet, the giant oceans and constant rain are bizarre and even a little frightening. I am met at the entrance by a tall, slender alien who tells me her name is Taun We. She leads me to the office of the Prime Minister.

Lama Su has been expecting me and stands up to greet me. I can feel the apprehension and fear coming from him, and it pleases me. This will be easy.

Welcome Lord Vader, he says, inviting me to sit down. The army Lord Sidious ordered is almost ready for delivery. Have you come to inspect them?

I've come for two reasons, I tell him. First of all we need more, ten million more than originally ordered. And we need them at the same time as the rest. I trust this won't be a problem.

Lama Su is unable to hide his anxiety and clasps his hands nervously. Ten million more? That wasn't in the original agreement.

No it wasn't, I agreed. But Lord Sidious wants it, and since he's in charge, I expect you to make it happen.

But Lord Vader, it takes years to grow clones to...

I stop him with a pinching motion of my fingers. His hands move to his throat and his white skin starts to take on a blue tinge. I said, I expect you to make it happen, I repeat slowly. Is that clear?

The prime minister nods and I release him. He falls to his knees, gasping for air as Taun We watches from behind me with undisguised horror. I turn to her next.

Take me to the lab, I tell her.

She nods in agreement and turns at once, more than happy to do my bidding now that she's witnessed first hand the awesome power that I have at my command.

The laboratory is as stark and sterile as the rest of this facility. A handful of scientists are busy at computer screens when we enter the room. Taun We gets their attention and I can feel

their curiosity as they turn to look at me. They are surprised by how young I am, and are determined not to take me seriously. I'll have to show them how serious an error that is.

I've come with instructions from Lord Sidious, I tell them. There is additional programming that needs to be included in the final stages of the clones' development.

Oh? And what might that be? One scientist asks me in a tone of condescension.

I hand him a data disc which he inserts into a data reader. He reads over it briefly and then looks up at me in horrified disbelief. Order sixty-six? What is this?? This looks like an order to kill the Jedi!

That's exactly what it is, I tell him calmly.

The scientist, who I've determined is the head of the group, looks at the others for a moment. You can't be serious, he says. I refuse to have any part of this! This is monstrous! This is... he stops as he feels the grip of invisible fingers on his larynx. I don't let up until he is dead, knowing that I need to set an example of him or the others will simply refuse to follow my orders as well. I look down at the dead body on the floor, a heady feeling of power filling me. I look up slowly at the other scientists, who are watching me with undisguised shock and fear.

Anyone else want to challenge Lord Sidious' order? I ask them. No one responds and so I simply leave the room, knowing that my orders will be followed to the letter now.

Obi-Wan watched Anakin closely, noting that his heart rate had increased. Obviously whatever he was remembering was causing him great distress. Obi-Wan was tempted to put an end to the meditation, but knew it would not be wise to do so. Anakin was in the midst of working through a great crisis and to cut him off midway without resolution could be dangerous. And so Obi-Wan let it continue.

Anakin's journey through the past three years of his life continued, each year that passed sending him deeper into the Darkness. He was horrified as memories of past atrocities filled his mind. The deep meditation enabled him to recall details he'd just as soon have never remembered.

Alderaan, the peace loving planet, a planet of pacifists. Why did Master Sidious insist that I come to this stupid party? I hate parties, and I hate politicians. This place is crawling with them I notice as I look around. What the... someone has bumped into me, I turn to see who it is.

Do you mind? An annoying little man asks me. He's slopped wine all over his dainty white tunic. When he sees my face he takes a step back, no doubt recognizing me.

Do I mind? I ask. I'm not the one wearing my drink right now.

Vader, I didn't see you there, he says lamely.

At nearly two meters tall, I'm kind of hard to miss. Are you blind as well as clumsy? I ask him with a smirk.

Well, no, he replies, starting to get annoyed with me. I did apologize, though you seem quite unwilling to accept my apology, he continues in a whiny voice.

I take a step closer to him, fighting my impulse to crush his windpipe. I sift through his primitive mind briefly, disgusted by the base, sexual yearnings that seem to fill his mind. I don't know who you are, but I don't like you, I tell him. It isn't my fault that you're a clumsy fool who is too busy thinking about sex that he can't watch where he's going.

His face grows red with embarrassment and indignation at this remark and I can't help but smile at him. What I was thinking about is none of your damn business, Vader, he snaps. You clearly have no respect for the privacy of others, he continued. No wonder you're such a valuable asset to the chancellor.

I know he's trying to insult me, but it will take more than a few petty comments to do so. Right now I'm more interested in who he's trying to bed. So whose bed are you trying to get into? I ask him.

I'm walking away now, he says, trying to muster up his dignity. He turns and starts to walk away. I can't resist one last jab and call after him. I suppose you're no stranger to rejection by now. That must get frustrating though, night after night. He ignores me and keeps walking away. I follow him with my eyes, curious now to see who it is who has his mind so preoccupied. And then I see her....Senator Padmé, the republic's biggest enabler and bleeding heart. I watch for a moment as the man slips an arm around her waist and kisses her passionately on the mouth. I frown, knowing that the man was doing it simply to grandstand. He wants me to know that she's his, the idiot. I look away, not sure why seeing him kiss the senator bothers me so much... I'm determined to speak to her, for I'm certain that she has no clue what an idiot this man she's with is. I watch her as she puts up with the dolt's overt affection and then sends him away. Perfect... she's going outside. Now's my chance...

I walk out onto the balcony and simply look at her for a few minutes. She's gorgeous, simply gorgeous... too bad she's a bleeding heart. I smile as I walk over to her, determined to take her down a few notches in her self righteousness. Spectacular, isn't it?

She turns quickly, startled by my voice. She's not happy to see me, but does her best not to let it show. Yes, very much so, she replies, doing her utmost to remain calm.

I watch her, sensing her apprehension. It makes me smile. Where is your clumsy boyfriend? I ask.

Excuse me?

He spilled wine all over himself bumping into me earlier. I'd say that's clumsy, wouldn't you?

She turns away, obviously not wanting to be drawn into a discussion about her idiotic boyfriend with me. Accidents happen, she remarks.

Indeed they do, I agree, leaning my arms on the terrace and looking out at the snowcapped mountains in the distance. He was distracted by thoughts of you, I tell her. Rather... provocative thoughts.

She turns and looks at me in shock. How would you know what he was thinking about? she demands.

I turn to her with a smile. I have a gift for reading the thoughts of others. Would you like me to prove it to you? I offer, my smile growing.

She frowns. No, she replies at once, turning away from me. Would you please leave me alone? she asks.

Not so fast, Senator, I think, probing her mind briefly to find something to use against her. Surprisingly, her mind is closed, and I am unable to read her thoughts. I'll have to use another tactic... He wants to screw you, I tell her at last, enjoying the look of shock on her face. But surely you knew that already, I add, watching her for a moment before walking away, feeling strangely frustrated and annoyed.

Memories of the ruthless manner in which he coerced Padmé to marry him followed, memories that only added to his already distressed condition. And then day he saved her, and things started to change between them...

No!! I feel her terror even before hear her scream, and run into the office. The sight that meets my eyes fills me with blind rage. Corrino has the senator pinned to the top of her desk. One knee is attempting to pry legs apart as his hands rip her blouse open allowing his access to her skin. He presses his mouth to the soft flesh of her exposed body. And that's when I step in. Using the anger that fills me, I hurl his body against the wall like a rag doll. The senator gets up, not understanding until she hears my voice from behind her.

Move away from him, Senator.

She whirls around to see me standing in the doorway. She nearly weeps with relief as she stumbles away from the desk, her body trembling.

Are you unharmed? I ask her.

Yes, she stammers as she pulls her blouse together, but not before I get a generous glimpse of the lacy bra under it. I... I think so, she stammers.

I nod, my eyes returning to Corrino who is starting to come around. I move over to the desk and lift him with the Force, my invisible grip around his throat. He opens his eyes, which fill with fear and loathing when he sees me standing before him.

And you call me an animal, I growled as I tighten my grip.

Corrino wants to retort, but he can't breathe, and can only grasp at his throat desperately.

Don't kill him.

I turn to look at the senator, who stands beside me now. Even from where I stand I can see that she is trembling, the bruises around her mouth and on her neck making me more angry. You can't be serious, I retort. After what he did to you?

She looks at Corrino, intense sadness in her eyes. Don't kill him, she says again as tears fill her eyes. Please, she adds, tentatively putting a hand on my forearm.

I frown, not understanding how she could show compassion for a man who had so nearly raped her, and yet she seems sincere. Were she not here, I know Corrino would be dead right now. It would be a pleasure to crush his larynx. Instead I release him, and he falls to his knees at once, gasping for air. You're the animal, Corrino, I growl. Not fit for decent society. And if I ever see you within a thousand meters of Senator Amidala again, I will not hesitate to crush every organ in your body. Do we understand one another?

Corrino looks up at me, the hatred clear in his eyes. Go to hell.

That's all I needed to hear, and smile. You first, I reply, releasing a blast of blue energy in his direction. Corrino's body jerks around violently as the Sith lighting rips through him.

Stop it! The senator cries, grabbing my arm again.

I only stop after a few more seconds, wanting more than anything to kill Corrino where he lay. But I don't, and release the pathetic man who now lies unconscious on the floor.

Do you require medical attention? I ask, turning to the senator. .

She shakes her head. No, she says quietly. A... a change of clothing would be nice, though.

I'll take you home, I tell her, removing my cloak. Put this on, I tell her, handing her the garment.

She's surprised by the gesture, and takes it, only too happy to cover herself up with it. Thank you, she says. I look at her, but don't answer. She is so proud, this one, so spirited... am I crazy to think I can best her? Am I a fool for even wanting to try?

The memories that followed were far easier to meditate upon. Padmé was relieved to see him smile at one point, and reasoned that he must be remembering the more pleasant aspects of his life. She glanced at Obi-Wan, hoping against hope that he wasn't able to read Anakin's thoughts.

The final memories that came to Anakin were of his confrontation with Palpatine, memories that soon removed the smile from his face.

Don't patronize me, Vader, I know you and she have been sexually involved for quite some time now. You deliberately disobeyed me, Vader. You just couldn't keep control of your carnal urges, could you?

I love Senator Amidala, I declare. Something you'd know nothing about.

Love? he laughed. Since when does a Sith know anything about love? And make no mistake, Vader. You are a Sith. Don't think that because you've given in to the pleasure of the flesh that makes you anything less than one.

I can feel my entire body tensing up as I fight against the rage that is mounting rapidly within me.

And yet, he continues, perhaps it's a good thing. Perhaps impregnating the senator would be a good plan. The fruits of such a union would be most useful, he concludes with an evil smile.

The rage explodes out of me, filling every part of me. You will not take my children from me! I scream.

Palpatine narrows his eyes. I've fallen into his trap, and he knows it. Such insolence, he snaps. You seem to forget whom you are talking to, Lord Vader! he says, lifting his hands to send a bolt of Sith lightning across the room. I hold out my hands and deflect the energy, sending it to the ceiling where it crackles harmlessly.

I won't take your abuse any longer, Sidious, I tell him, walking towards the desk, sending a potent energy blast at the stunned old man.

Palpatine is too shocked to react in time, and the blast sends him flying back against the chair. He winces in pain, seeing first hand just how powerful his slave has truly become.

Traitor! he hisses once the lighting has subsided. This is the thanks I get for making you what you are? You betray me because of that whore??

The rage of the moment returned to Anakin in full measure, and he released Padmé's hand, his fists clenching in rage. All three who watched him grew alarmed, and it was all Padmé could do not to shake Anakin out of his meditative trance. She didn't need to, however, for it was at this point that he opened his eyes. He said nothing, as all three of those watching him waited in silence. Finally it was Padmé who spoke.

"Anakin? Please say something," she said.

Anakin turned to her, his eyes troubled and impossible to read. He said nothing and stood up. "I need to be alone," he said quietly walking away from them.

Padmé watched him leave and then turned back to Obi-Wan. "Obi-Wan?" she said.

Obi-Wan didn't know what to tell her, for Anakin had closed himself off from him. "Let him be," he said at last, not knowing what else to say. "No doubt this has been very difficult for him. He needs time to assimilate it."

His words did nothing to alleviate her fear. "I know that," she replied.

"He's not in danger is he?" Shmi asked as she watched Anakin walk out onto the balcony.

"Danger?" Padmé asked. "What kind of danger?"

"Danger of the Dark Side," Shmi replied quietly. She looked at Obi-Wan. "Well?"

Obi-Wan was silent as he too watched Anakin. His emotions were in a jumble, and impossible to read. "I...don't know," he said at last. "I'm sorry, but I really don't know what to tell you, Mrs. Lars."

Padmé felt the anxiety well up within her. "I told you this was a bad idea!" she cried, jumping to her feet.

"Padmé, please," Obi-Wan said, standing up too. "Leave him."

Padmé turned to him. "I've taken enough of your advice for one day, Obi-Wan," she retorted. "My husband needs me, and I'm not going to let him down. And may the Maker help you if the Dark Side claims him again."

Obi-Wan said nothing, and merely watched as Padmé went after her husband.

Chapter 60

Chapter 60

Anakin stood looking out at the darkening sky, his emotions in turmoil. Painful images of his past tore at his mind, like shards of glass inside his head, and he felt helpless to stop them. *I wanted to know, I had to know... and now that I do, what now? How do I come to terms with what I've been? With who I am?*

"Ani."

He'd felt her presence even before he'd heard her voice, her soothing, warm presence that had always managed to sooth the demons within him. He turned to her and looked down into her eyes. There was no accusation there, no judgment: only love, and concern. "Ani speak to me," she said, moving closer to him. "Tell me what's in your heart."

Anakin shook his head. "I can't," he said softly. "I... I don't even know how to put into words what I'm feeling," he told her. He lowered his eyes, unable to look her in the eyes any longer. "I don't know how you can love me," he said, turning away from her.

"Anakin, don't talk like this," she said, moving to face him. "I know all about your past, I knew it when I married you, and I fell in love with you anyway. You've changed, Anakin, surely you know that."

Her words did little to alleviate the crushing sense of guilt that he felt. "I need to go," he said, leaving her and walking over to where Padmé's speeder was parked beside the balcony.

"Where are you going?" she called after him.

"I don't know," he told her. "I'll be back."

With that he flew off, leaving Padmé alone. She sat down, dropping her face into her hands. *I hope you're happy now, Obi-Wan*, she thought angrily.

Anakin flew through the darkening city, not even knowing where he was going. He flew as though on instinct, allowing the chaos of his emotions to direct him. He didn't know where he would end up, but decided to go with his instincts, not knowing what else to trust at this point. When he saw the large complex that had been Palpatine's residence coming up on his right side, he knew that was where he was meant to go.

Setting the speeder down in the private landing platform behind the building, Anakin climbed out of the speeder. He looked up at the building as a myriad of memories flashed through his mind. He frowned; the memories of this horrible place making the tension within him intensify. And yet, he knew that he had to do this, he knew that he had to face this. And so he walked to the entrance and keyed in the security code that he remembered now. The door opened at once, and Anakin stepped inside, bracing himself for what he was about to face.

"Where is Anakin?" Shmi asked when Padmé returned to the living room.

“He’s flown off,” Padmé told her. “I don’t know where. I’m not even sure he knows where he’s going,” she added.

Shmi shook her head, her dark eyes full of concern. “He was so upset, in so much pain,” she said. “I knew this was a bad idea.”

Padmé said nothing, but merely looked at Obi-Wan. “Where has he gone?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“But I thought you had all the answers,” she retorted hotly. “You Jedi know everything, don’t you?”

“Padmé, I know how upset you are,” Obi-Wan began, standing up.

“You have no idea what I’m feeling,” Padmé replied angrily. ‘Don’t presume to know my feelings, Obi-Wan, don’t you dare presume where I’m concerned! You have no idea what can of worms you’ve opened up, do you? You don’t know Anakin like I do, you don’t know what haunts him, what demons he’s struggled with all these years. I do! But you wouldn’t listen to me, you have your own agenda, you and the Council,’ she spat the word. “I hope he never decides to become a Jedi, because quite honestly I’d hate for him to become like you and the rest of your sanctimonious cronies.”

Padmé ran out of the room at this point, too upset to remain any longer.

“I... I don’t know what to say,” Obi-Wan said quietly.

“She’s very upset,” Shmi said. “And no doubt her hormones are making her say things she doesn’t necessarily mean. Perhaps it would be best if you left, Master Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, I think you’re right,” he said. ‘He’ll be alright, Mrs. Lars,’ he said as he started towards the exit. “Your son is a very strong, very brave young man.”

Shmi smiled. “I know he is,” she replied. “I just hope he’s strong enough.”

“Thank you for dinner,” Obi-Wan said. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Shmi replied and watched as Obi-Wan walked to the lift. And then she sat down and did her best not to worry.

An eerie silence filled the enormous estate as Anakin moved through the rooms. He could feel the residual traces of Darkness that still lingered, echoes of the past that he was very much a part of. A thousand memories flashed through his mind as he walked from room to room. He’d spent more of his childhood here than he had with his mother he reflected bitterly; a childhood robbed of any trace of joy and all vestige of innocence. *Darth Vader was born here*, he reflected grimly, still feeling the lashes upon his back as though he were six years old once more.

And then he saw the place he knew he’d been drawn here to face, the room where he’d spent many nights alone and in pain. Standing outside the door, Anakin braced himself, preparing for the inevitable onslaught of emotions that he would feel upon seeing the room once more.

No, please don’t lock the door! I’ll be good! I won’t ask any more about my mommy!

Too late for that, boy, Dooku told me. You were warned, and now you'll learn.

No please! It's so dark in here! I beg him, grabbing the edge of his cloak. He pulls it away from me with such force that I fall to the floor.

Don't tell me you're afraid of the dark!? he laughs. You have no idea how ironic that is. Soon you'll learn to embrace the dark, boy. You'll learn to rely on it, for you'll soon see there is nothing else in life you can rely on.

His words confuse me, and give me no comfort. He does mean to lock me in here, alone. I sit in the corner of the room, my legs drawn up to my chest, my arms wrapped around my knees in an attempt to keep from shaking. But it is cold in here, and I'm afraid. The door closes and I hear it lock, and I am left alone in the dark. I'm sorry Mom, I say into the dark. I'm sorry for whatever I did to make you not want me any more... I'd take it back if only I was given the chance...

Anakin clenched his fists, pushing the memory from his mind as he pushed open the door. He never knew that fear had a smell, but he knew it now. The room was tiny, not even big enough for him to stand erect in, but the fear and desperation seemed to be etched into the very stonework of the walls. "You bastards," Anakin whispered hoarsely, the emotions welling up in his eyes. "I hope you're rotting in Hell now, you monsters."

He left the room, suddenly feeling anxious to be out of the house. He felt as though the darkness that still resided within its wall was taunting him, as if Palpatine's ghost were here trying to lure him back to the abyss. "You won't take me again," he said aloud. "Do you hear that, you decrepit old bastard?? I'm free! You'll never own me or my soul again!"

He felt better having made the declaration, even if it was only to himself, and started to leave when an idea struck him. Palpatine was a rich man, a very very rich man. Where had all the money gone to? Who had inherited his wealth? There could only be one person he'd have left his estate to, and that was Anakin himself. He smiled as he thought of the irony, and knew exactly what he would do with the money once he'd cleared it from the legal red tape it was no doubt mired in. With this thought buoying his spirits, he left the house, making a mental note to have it demolished once he'd stripped it of anything valuable.

Shmi watched as the speeder approached the building. Anakin had been gone for nearly three hours, and she was beginning to worry.

"I'm glad you're back," Shmi said as Anakin walked over to her.

"It's late," he said. "You should be in bed."

"It is late," she said, "but I couldn't go to bed not knowing where you were."

Anakin nodded his understanding. "I needed to go somewhere," he told her. "It was important."

"I see," Shmi replied. "And now that you have?"

Anakin sat down and looked at her. "I'm glad I went," he said. "I needed some closure, and I think I have it now."

"I'm glad to hear it," Shmi said. "That's a good first step."

“Yes,” he agreed. “But only one step. I know it will take me a while to come to terms with everything I learned today.”

“It will,” she replied. ‘But you have me here, and a wife who adores you.’ Shmi smiled. “You should have seen her tearing a strip off of poor Obi-Wan earlier,” she told him. “She’s really worried about you.”

“Where is she?” he asked.

“She tried to stay up to wait for you, but she fell asleep on the sofa,” Shmi told him. “Poor dear must be exhausted from all the worrying.”

Anakin nodded as he stood up. “Go to bed, Mom,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. “It’s late.”

“Yes, I think I will,” Shmi replied. She gave Anakin a kiss on the cheek. “Good night, Ani. Sleep well.”

Shmi retired to her own room for the night while Anakin walked into the living room. He sat down on the edge of the sofa where Padmé was asleep. Bending to her, he kissed her softly on the cheek. Her eyelids fluttered and she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

“Ani, I’m so glad you’re home!” she said, sitting up at once and wrapping her arms around his neck.

Anakin held her close, feeling badly for having worried her so much. “Come on, you need your sleep,” he said.

She pulled back and looked at him. “Are you alright?” she asked, framing his face with her hands.

He took one of her hands and kissed the palm of it. “I will be,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“I wish Obi-Wan had never said anything to you,” she said with a frown.

He smiled. “I heard you gave him a good blast,” he said.

“I did,” she said with a yawn as they got up from the sofa. “He deserved it after what he put you through.”

Anakin put an arm around her as they walked to their bedroom. “I love it when you’re overprotective,” he said.

Padmé wasn’t amused. “You’re teasing me,” she said.

“No I’m not,” he told her as they stepped into the bedroom. ‘I’m serious.’ He sat down on the edge of their bed. “After reliving my past, it’s reassuring to know I have someone like you in my future.”

“Oh Ani,” she said, standing in front of him. “I’m sorry you had to go through all that,” she said, stroking his face gently.

Anakin said nothing in response, and merely allowed her love to surround him and soothe him. “You don’t have to say that,” he said. “You tried to dissuade me from doing it, remember? I guess I’m just too damn stubborn for my own good.”

A hint of a smile touched Padmé's mouth. "Yes, you are," she replied. "But since it's your birthday, I won't rub it in."

Anakin laughed. "That's very kind of you," he said, running his hands up the length of her arms.

"You do have a birthday gift coming," she told him. "I ordered something for you today. If I'd known it was your birthday, I would have had it ready for you today."

"You didn't need to do that," he told her. "I don't need anything."

"But it's tradition," she said. "And you love tradition, remember?"

Anakin nodded. "Yes, I remember," he replied with a smile.

"You'll get it in a couple of days," she told him. She smiled as she got an idea. "But in the mean time, there is something I can give you," she said, moving closer to him.

"Oh? And what is that?" he said.

Padmé smiled. "Well, in order for you to fully appreciate it, you need to be naked," she told him.

Anakin smiled. "I think I can comply," he said, unbuttoning his tunic.

Chapter 61

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Shmi watched her son as he ate his breakfast. He seemed calmer now, but she knew that he was still shaken from the previous day's revelations.

"What time is the meeting this morning?" she asked him.

Anakin looked up from his breakfast. "Eleven hundred hours," he told her. He glanced at his wrist chrono. "I wish it was sooner," he grumbled.

Shmi smiled.

"Relax Ani."

Anakin looked at his mother again. "I will once this meeting is behind me," he told her.

Shmi nodded. "I'm sure," she said. 'But you've been in many meetings, haven't you? You're part of the Jedi Council,' she pointed out. "Why is this making you so nervous?"

Anakin shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted, returning his eyes to his breakfast. "I'm no politician, Mom. This is way out of my comfort zone."

Shmi wanted to laugh at the idea of her son even having a 'comfort zone'. "Anakin, you are passionate about this," Shmi told him. "Aren't you?"

"Of course."

"Then that will speak for you," she said. "You don't need to worry about making fancy speeches or spouting rhetoric. Just be honest, be yourself, and show them the same zeal you showed the Jedi Council. That will convince them more than any fake eloquence ever could."

"Good advice," Padmé said as she joined them at the table. She gave Anakin a kiss on the cheek as she took a seat beside him. 'You're absolutely right, Shmi,' she continued. "Honesty goes a lot farther than fancy words ever can."

"Well that's a good thing," Anakin replied. 'Because I've never been an eloquent man,' he said. "But I can make a convincing argument if I feel passionate enough about something."

Padmé smiled. "Oh yes, I'd say so," she agreed.

Shmi laughed. "Yes, so would I," she put in. 'You know I was speaking with Cliegg last night,' she told them. "And he reminded me of something that just might help you, Ani."

"What's that?" Anakin asked.

"I told him about your plans, and how you were going to address the chancellors today," Shmi said. "And he reminded me about the mines. If the Senate knew about them, don't you think the idea of bringing Tatooine into the Republic would be a lot more appealing?"

"Mines? What mines?" Padmé asked.

“According to the elders of Tatooine, there is an enormous lithium mine in the Jundland Wastes,” Anakin told her. “It’s never been mined, or even explored, just because of the sheer cost involved. But if Tatooine was part of the Republic, it could be.”

Padmé nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, it could,” she agreed. “It could make a huge difference to the economy of the planet. Of course the cost of such an operation would be tremendous,” she reminded him.

“I know,” Anakin replied. “I have an idea about that too,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Shmi asked.

“I have a feeling that I will be coming into a large inheritance in the near future,” Anakin told her.

Shmi frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Palpatine,” Padmé said, as the thought struck her suddenly. “You’re his only heir.”

“More than likely, yes,” Anakin replied. “And he was enormously wealthy. What better way to use his ill-gotten gains then to use it to create a viable way of life for the people of Tatooine?”

Shmi smiled. “I can’t think of a single way,” she said.

“Neither can I,” Padmé agreed.

Two hours later

“Relax Ani.”

Anakin looked down at his wife, adjusting his cloak for the umpteenth time. “I am relaxed,” he replied.

Padmé smiled. “Is that why you’re sweating?”

Anakin drew his hand over his brow. “I’m not,” he said.

Padmé drew closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Anakin, both Mon Mothma and Bail Organa are reasonable individuals,” she told him. “They are both open minded, and I’m certain will agree with your proposal.”

“I hope so,” Anakin replied. ‘I can’t do this without them.’ He kissed her brow. “Or you, Senator.”

Padmé smiled. “Well I suppose there are some advantages to being married to a politician,” she remarked.

Anakin smiled as he put his arms around her. “Oh I can think of many advantages,” he replied. “Last night for example,” he added.

Padmé felt her face grow warm at the thought of it. “You enjoyed that, did you?”

“Are you kidding?” he asked. “I’m still weak in the knees.”

Padmé laughed.

The lift stopped, and Anakin released her just as the doors opened. He adjusted his cloak once more as he stepped out of the lift and followed his wife down the corridor to the office of the co-chancellors. Anakin was relieved that they had chosen not to use the office of the former chancellor, for he was certain that the memories of that room would be too intense for him to handle at the present time. Instead, Organa and Mothma had chosen a far more modest suite of offices for their use, devoid of the ornate and ostentatious artwork that Palpatine loved to flaunt.

Jedi Masters Yoda and Mace Windu were already present in the office of the chancellors and both looked up when Anakin and Padmé entered the office.

“Good morning,” Mon Mothma said, giving them a smile.

Bail Organa stood up to greet them, and held out a hand to Anakin. “It’s good to see you, Anakin,” he said.

Anakin felt some of his nervousness fall away by the simple gesture, and shook Organa’s hand gratefully. “Thank you, Chancellor,” he replied.

“Please sit down,” Mon Mothma said. “We’re quite eager to hear your proposal,” she added, looking at Anakin.

Anakin glanced at his wife as they took their seats. She gave him a smile of reassurance.

“As you know, I recently spent several weeks on Tatooine,” Anakin began.

“Yes, you crashed there and lost your memory,” Mon Mothma said.

Anakin nodded. “While I was there I came to greatly respect the people of Tatooine,” he continued. “If it weren’t for them, I would surely have died. They are good people, the people of Tatooine. They have so little, and yet they gave me everything they had, even though I was but a stranger to them. The Hutts rule Tatooine, and for many years have perpetrated a cruel and unjust dictatorship that exploits the people ruthlessly. Poverty and slavery are rampant there, and I deeply believe that they deserve better than the lot that fate has dealt them”

“Unfortunately Tatooine is not the only planet where there is poverty in the galaxy,” Organa pointed out. “Surely you realize that.”

“Yes, of course I realize that,” Anakin said. “But I also realize that the Republic wasn’t built over night. It took centuries to create it, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” Mon Mothma replied. “You’re right. I’m afraid I don’t quite understand what you’re asking of us, Anakin.”

“We would like to propose that the Senate takes action to bring the planet of Tatooine into the Republic,” Padmé said at this point.

Mon Mothma and Organa looked at one another in surprise at her words, for this was not at all what they were expecting.

“The Jedi Council is prepared to help in taking the Hutts out of power,” Mace Windu put in at this point. “With the back up of the clone army, of course.”

Anakin could sense their reticence, and decided he needed to up the ante. "Tatooine has a lot to offer," he said. "It's more than just a giant desert. The people are hard working and decent, and there is enormous mineral wealth buried within the desert that has never been exploited. If Tatooine were part of the Republic, it could be, and the economy of the planet would finally start to flourish."

"The cost of exploiting a mine in such an inhospitable environment would be enormous," Organa stated at this point. "Would you expect the Republic to foot the bill?"

"No, I will," Anakin said, to the surprise of all but his wife.

"*You* will?" Mothma said. "Do you realize what kind of money you're talking about?"

Anakin nodded. "About the same amount as I stand to inherit as the sole heir of the late chancellor," he said with a hint of a smile.

Organa's eyes widened at this. "Of course," he said. "You would be his only heir. And you'd be willing to use your inheritance to do this?"

"I don't want his money," Anakin stated emphatically. "It's dirty, tainted money. But if it were used to benefit the worthy people of Tatooine, I'd be more than willing to accept the inheritance."

Yoda nodded with approval. Obi-Wan had told the Council what had transpired the previous night, and the Jedi were concerned about Anakin's state of mind. But it seemed that their worries about him returning to the dark side were unfounded, at least for the time being.

"Might I suggest we take this proposal to the Senate?" Mon Mothma said finally. "This is a democracy, after all."

"I agree," Organa said. "We will take it to a vote," he added.

Padmé looked at Anakin with a smile. He returned her smile. It was a positive first step.

"Thank you," Anakin said at last, standing up. "I know you won't regret this."

"One thing though, Anakin," Organa asked as Padmé stood to join her husband.

"What's that?" Anakin asked.

"Are you interested in being part of the new government, should the Senate decide one is to be created?" Organa asked.

Anakin smiled. "No, not at all," he admitted. 'I'm not a politician. I lack the diplomatic skills necessary.' He was thoughtful for a moment. "But I know someone who'd be perfect for the job."

With that he and Padmé left, leaving those who remained wondering about his last remark.

Chapter 62

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Within a week the Senate had taken a vote on Anakin's proposal, and after several days' deliberation, the Senate voted in favor of bringing Tatooine into the Republic. It didn't take the Jedi long to put together a task force to remove the Hutts from power, and shortly afterward, to incarcerate most of them for crimes dating back several decades.

The people of Tatooine were in something of a state of shock at the turn of events, for they had considered themselves to be non-existent as far as the Republic went. But when they heard the name Anakin Skywalker, they knew what had happened. One of their own had found the means to help them. And when Cedler Sanles, a Mos Espa merchant and known humanitarian was appointed as president of the new government of Tatooine, they knew that their days of oppression were behind them.

Once Anakin had managed to claim the enormous inheritance left to him by Palpatine, he turned to the estate of the former chancellor next. Selling everything of value, Anakin added to the fortune considerably, all of which he handed over to the government of Tatooine. The building itself was then demolished, and a public park was erected in its place, one open to all citizens of the Republic, no matter what their social status was.

Anakin continued to suffer from nightmares, and realized that he probably would do so for the rest of his life. The past was behind him, but there were far too many scars for him to ever get over it completely. Having a wife who supported him and the prospect of twins in the very near future made the burden easier to bear. And as the time drew closer for the birth of the twins, who were to be named Luke and Leia, Anakin found himself growing more and more occupied with thoughts of diapers and midnight feedings. The thought of fatherhood both terrified and excited him, for deep down inside he was afraid that having had no role model himself, he wouldn't know how to be a good father. He didn't admit this fear to anyone, not even his wife; but was determined to be the best father he could be, despite having had no father himself.

The Jedi Council had come to accept Anakin's decision not to join them, and was greatly relieved that he had not succumbed to the Dark Side when the memories of his dark past had returned to him in full measure. They were certain now that he was indeed the Chosen One, and as such he would, in time, become a Jedi Knight. But for now they decided to leave him be. Anakin Skywalker had never been master of his own destiny until now, and they decided it was wise to allow him this dignity that had been denied him all his life.

Shmi had spent several weeks with her son and daughter-in-law, but once the harvest started on Tatooine she returned to her home, with the promise to return once the twins were born.

Padmé had decided that she wanted to have the twins on Naboo, away from the media and the public eye that always seemed to be upon her and Anakin. And so when she began her eighth month of her pregnancy, they made the trip to Naboo. The lake retreat had always been

one of Padmé's favorite places, and so it was there that she decided the twins would be born. Anakin was somewhat uneasy with the thought of being so far from a hospital, but they had acquired a medical droid, and so he accepted her decision. Dormé was there with them, as well as Padmé's mother, Jobal.

As Padmé's due date grew closer, Anakin began to grow more and more anxious. They had taken a course together while they were still on Coruscant, and the more he learned about the entire experience, the more worried he became. Padmé had assured him that women had been going through childbirth for centuries, but that didn't make him feel any better.

"Your babies are fully engaged, Milady," the droid reported. "They can arrive at any time now."

"So when will they come?" Anakin asked the droid.

"It is impossible to predict, sir," the droid replied.

Anakin frowned. "Are you programmed for child birth or aren't you?" he demanded.

Padmé smiled. "Ani, babies come when they're ready," she assured him. "No one can predict when they'll arrive."

"That's ridiculous," he grumbled. "With the technology that exists in this galaxy, you'd think there'd be a way."

Padmé laughed as she stood up with his assistance. "Well where would be the fun if we knew?" she said. "Don't you like surprises?"

"No," he replied. "I don't."

Padmé shook her head as they left the room, trying to keep her laughter to herself.

As it turned out, Anakin didn't have long to wait. Two nights later, he was awoken by a strong tremor in the Force, followed immediately by the urgent voice of his wife telling him she was quite certain that this was the real thing.

"Okay, just relax, Angel," he told her as he scrambled out of bed. "I'll get the doctor, I mean the droid," he said, stumbling out of the bedroom, stubbing his toe in the process. Padmé would have smiled if another contraction hadn't chosen that moment to engulf her midriff with pain.

"Hurry Ani!" she called after him.

Luke and Leia Skywalker were born four hours later respectively. Anakin remained at his wife's side through the entire labor, surprising himself with how calm and helpful he was. But when his mother-in-law placed his newborn son into his arms for the first time, he wasn't able to hold back the tears of sheer joy.

"Look at him, Senator," he told Padmé as he held Luke close to her. "He's beautiful!"

"And so is your daughter," Jobal added, bringing Leia over to her mother.

For a few moments both parents simply gazed at their infants, the emotions that filled them rendering them speechless.

“They’re perfect, just perfect,” Jobal said, looking at the twins with a smile.

Anakin looked up at her and nodded. “They are,” he said. He looked back at Padmé. ‘Thank you,’ he said to her. “Thank you for these beautiful babies. They are the greatest gift I’ve ever received.”

Padmé smiled. “You had a part in these babies, Anakin,” she reminded him. “I can’t take all the credit.”

Anakin smiled. “I did, but after witnessing what you just went through over the past nine months and most especially the past few hours, I’m in a state of awe.”

Padmé felt tears fill her eyes. “Ani,” she said, reaching up and touching his face.

“You never cease to amaze me, Senator,” he told her. “And I have a feeling that you never will.”

Luke and Leia’s Naming Ceremony took place one month later. Anakin and Padmé had decided to remain on Naboo for the time being, and had invited family and friends to help them celebrate the ancient rite of Naboo. The large terrace outside the house was festooned with flower garlands and set up with table and chairs where the guests were enjoying a pleasant afternoon complete with plenty of food and drink.

Shmi and Cliegg Lars were, of course, present, doting on their new grandchildren like only grandparents can. They were, however, not to be outdone by the Naberries, who were also present. Luckily there were two babies, so each grandmother had one to hold and coo over equally.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was also present among the guests, for Padmé had long since come to realize that he had acted in Anakin’s best interest on that day when he’d helped him regain his lost memory. Although Anakin had not joined the Jedi, he and Obi-Wan had remained friends, and was happy to have him present on this important day.

“So what’s new on Coruscant, Obi-Wan?” Padmé asked as she, Anakin and Obi-Wan stood together on the terrace.

“Oh, not a great deal since you left,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘The mines of Tatooine have proven to be an enormous source of wealth,’ he added, “far more so than anyone had ever imagined.”

“That’s incredible,” Padmé replied. “Imagine if the Hutts had only used their money to exploit them they would have had riches beyond the wildest dreams of avarice.”

“Well the Hutts weren’t bright enough to invest in something that didn’t give them an immediate return,” Anakin told her. “Good thing too, I can’t imagine how corrupt the galaxy would be if they had that kind of power.”

“Almost as corrupt as it would have been if a Sith had taken control of it,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin nodded. “Yes, no doubt,” he replied. “I suppose you and I wouldn’t be having this or any conversation, Obi-Wan.”

“No, the Jedi wouldn’t exist,” Obi-Wan agreed. ‘You saved the Order from its own inability to see the truth. Changes should have been made many years ago,’ he told him.

“Perhaps Palpatine never would have become as powerful as he had if we’d done so sooner.”

“What changes are you talking about?” Padmé asked.

“Haven’t you heard?” Obi-Wan said.

“We don’t get a lot of news out here,” Anakin explained. “Nor the time to watch it either,” he added with a smile.

Obi-Wan smiled. “Yes, of course,” he replied. ‘The Jedi Order has made changes to the code we live by. We have decided to allow Jedi Knights to have families,’ he said. “After witnessing first hand the transformation that came over you because of yours, we reasoned that families were a positive influence, and thus that Jedi ought to have the right to have one.”

“I think that is wonderful,” Padmé said, looking up at Anakin with a smile. “Family is very important in a person’s life.”

“Indeed,” Obi-Wan replied. ‘We’ve also made changes with regards to the acquiring of new recruits,’ he continued. “We are no longer simply taking infants from their parents,” he told them. “While we will continue to seek out Force sensitive infants, it will be up to their parents to decide if they want their child to become a padawan.”

Anakin smiled. “Wise, very wise,” he said. “I don’t suppose you made that rule with any particular Force sensitive infants in mind, did you?” he asked.

Obi-Wan chuckled. “Well, I have to admit that the Council has been very curious about your twins,” he told them. “I don’t suppose you’ve had their levels tested yet, have you?”

“No, we haven’t,” Padmé stated. “They’re only a month old, for goodness sake, Obi-Wan,” she added.

Anakin put an arm around his wife’s shoulders. “Good thing you made that rule,” he told Obi-Wan, “or the entire clone army wouldn’t be a match for her.”

Obi-Wan laughed again.

“So now that Jedi are allowed families, can we expect to be getting a wedding invitation from you soon?” Anakin asked Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan’s eyes widened in shock. “Me? Married? Oh goodness no,” he declared. “You know me, Anakin. A crusty old bachelor to the end.”

“Yeah, sure,” Anakin replied. “I happen to know better,” he said cryptically, leaving Padmé to wonder what he was talking about.

Obi-Wan merely smiled. “And what are your plans, Anakin?” he asked, deciding to change the subject. “Have the new rules made the prospect of becoming a Jedi any more appealing to you?”

Anakin shrugged and looked down at Padmé. “Maybe,” he said. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“Well, whatever you decide it will be your decision to make,” Obi-Wan assured him. “In the meantime, enjoy your beautiful new younglings. They grow up awfully fast, from what I understand.”

“Thank you Obi-Wan,” Padmé said. “We plan to do just that.”

Chapter 63

Epilogue

One year later...

"Luke, Leia, come along now."

Luke and Leia Skywalker looked up from the puzzle they were working on to look at their father.

"You heard me, let's go," Anakin said, walking over and scooping up one twin under each arm. This had been the twins' plan all along, and giggled as their father carried them like sacks of wet cement. "Trouble makers," Anakin muttered, giving each of them a tickle. Luke and Leia only giggled in response.

"Are we all set?" Padmé asked, emerging from the bedroom and meeting them in the corridor.

"Yep," Anakin said, looking down at the twins.

Padmé shook her head when she saw the way he was holding the twins. He was like a third child in some ways, she mused. "Does everyone have a clean face and dry pants?"

"I do," Anakin told her with a grin. "Do I count?"

"Well you're not the one the Council is testing today," Padmé reminded him as she took Luke from his father. "So I suppose not. I'm still uneasy about this, Ani," she said as they stepped onto the lift with the twins.

"I know," Anakin replied. "So am I. But I don't think we have a choice, Padmé. They don't know how to control their powers, and after what happened yesterday, I think they need to learn."

Padmé nodded grimly. Luke and Leia had nearly given Dormé a heart attack when they had levitated her to the ceiling and then held her there for nearly a whole minute. Clearly the powers the Skywalker twins possessed couldn't be ignored any longer, and their parents had reluctantly decided to bring Luke and Leia to the Jedi Council. They would be tested, and, if the Council recommended, taught to use their powers.

Padmé watched her husband as they flew with the twins to the Jedi Temple. She wasn't Force sensitive, but she knew exactly what was going through his mind. They had decided when Luke and Leia were born that if the day ever arrived when their powers proved to be beyond Anakin's ability to control, they would seek out the Jedi. And if the Jedi decided that Luke and Leia required formal training, then Anakin himself would himself join the Jedi.

"You okay with this?" Padmé asked him, reaching over and taking his hand.

"Yes," he replied. "I think deep down inside I knew this day would come. Perhaps it's my destiny to be a Jedi after all."

“Well, the Council has always thought so,” Padmé replied. “And if Luke and Leia are to be trained, it only makes sense that you learn the Jedi ways as well.”

Anakin nodded. “I know,” he said. “I just don’t want Luke and Leia to become their little laboratory specimens,” he said. “I won’t allow that.”

“I know you won’t,” she replied, giving his hand a squeeze. “And they know it too, Ani. They changed the Code for you and the twins, remember?”

“I remember,” Anakin replied. He smiled. “Though I’m not the only one to have benefited. I’ve never seen Obi-Wan so happy. He’s like a ten year old boy at a pod race.”

Padmé laughed. “Well, Dormé is about the same, I’d say. They make a nice couple, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” he replied. “She’s perfect for him.”

The Jedi Council was ready for Anakin and Padmé, and anxious to see the twins. They had been curious about Luke and Leia since their birth, and from what Obi-Wan Kenobi had told them of his visits with the twins, their curiosity had only increased.

Anakin and Padmé stopped in the corridor outside of the Council chamber, taking a moment to replace lost shoes and clean faces. Luke and Leia sensed their parents’ anxiety, and were rather quiet and expectant, almost as though they understood the significance of the occasion.

“All set?” Padmé asked Anakin, her question more than just a reference to the appearance of the twin he was tidying up.

“Yes, at least I think so,” he told her, slicking down Luke’s unruly cowlick once more. He looked up at her. “Let’s go.”

Anakin and Padmé walked into the Council chamber, each carrying one of the twins. Luke and Leia were quiet, each of them very curious about their surroundings. When they saw Obi-Wan, however, they forgot all about their curiosity and wiggled out of their parents’ arms and ran to him.

“Obi! Obi!” they squealed in unison, excited to see their favorite uncle. Obi-Wan smiled and simply opened his arms up to the twins who he then scooped up into a big hug. The other members of the Council watched with a mixture of envy and disapproval as Obi-Wan showed his affection for the twins openly.

“And how are you today, younglings?” he asked the twins. “This is a very important day, you know,” he told them as Leia started grabbing at his beard, which never ceased to fascinate her for some reason.

“They certainly love their Uncle Obi-Wan,” Anakin said as he watched the twins with a smile. “Must be all the treats he sneaks them.”

Obi-Wan looked up aghast as Anakin winked at him. “And you thought we didn’t know,” he said.

Yoda smiled, surprising himself at how easily he was able to overlook the blatant disregard for protocol. Times had changed, he reasoned, and there was no sense clinging to the past.

This young man had forced change, and in doing so, had ensured the very survival of the Order. And now he had brought his children to them. Luke and Leia represented the future of the Jedi, and there wasn't a being present at this session that didn't realize how different that future would be. They were the children of the Chosen One, after all, and if the Jedi had learned anything in the past year, it was that the Chosen One did things his own way, made his own rules, and had a vision unlike any others. Change was good Yoda had told himself; change meant survival and it meant growth.

"Now, leave us," Yoda said, standing up and walking over to Anakin and Padmé. "In one hour's time, return you may."

Anakin and Padmé looked at one another uneasily. They had not anticipated having to leave Luke and Leia alone with the Council. But then they looked over at Obi-Wan, and at how lovingly he was interacting with the twins, and realized that they had nothing to fear.

"It's probably better if we don't say anything to them," Padmé told Anakin. "You know how they get when we leave."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Anakin agreed. He looked once more at the twins, and then took Padmé's hand and left the room with her, doing his best not to worry.

Later that night...

"Asleep?"

"Yep, out cold, both of them," Anakin said as he climbed into bed beside his wife.

"It's been a long day for them," Padmé reasoned as she snuggled up to her husband. "For all of us."

Anakin nodded in agreement. "Can you believe that the twins' midichlorian count is higher than Yoda's?" he said with a smile.

"Yes," she replied readily. "I've seen them in action; I'm not surprised at all."

Anakin laughed. "I suppose I'm not either," he replied. He sighed. "So I guess the Chosen One will be a Jedi after all," he said.

Padmé looked up at him. "You're not regretting your decision, are you?"

"No," he said, putting an arm around her. "I guess I'm just...nervous."

Padmé smiled. "You're so cute when you're nervous," she teased him.

Anakin laughed. "Am I?"

"Absolutely."

"You're making fun of me."

"Would I do that?"

"Absolutely," he replied, pulling her into the crook of his arm and kissing her at last.

THE END